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Allegiances

RAINCLAN

LEADER: Snowstar- Large old tom with a thick pelt as white as snow.

DEPUTY: Suntail- White she-cat with ginger markings and an unmistakable red tail.

MEDICINE CAT: Webear- Long, black she-cat with a white twitchy ear.

WARRIORS:

Toadface- Old grey tom with a disfigured face and stumpy tail.

Stormspirit- Handsome grey tom.

Sagefur- Dusty, tawny tom with pale eyes. **Mentor to Cricketpaw.**

Owltail- Blond tabby tom.

Nightbreeze- Black and white she-cat.

Patchnose- Calico she-cat with blue eyes. **Mentor to Finchpaw.**

Scarleg- Long-haired tabby she-cat with a scarred hind leg.

Sparkwhisker- Pale blond tabby tom.

Maskclaw- Sleek tortoiseshell tom with bright eyes.

Dawnleaf- Pale brown she-cat with white fur.

APPRENTICES:

Cricketpaw- Brown and white tabby she-cat.

Finchpaw- Brown tabby tom.

QUEENS:

Berryface- Stocky tortoiseshell, oldest nursery queen.

Opal- Ginger she-cat.

Leopardeye- Silver bengal she-cat with pale eyes.

ELDERS:

Slowcloud- White tom with soft grey spots.

Fawneyes- Once beautiful tawny she-cat.

Deadmouth- Mute black tom with a twisted jaw.

Coldclaw- Dark grey tom with silver paws.

MAPLECLAN

LEADER: Tanglestar- Pale stocky she-cat with matted, curly fur.

DEPUTY: Sootstep- Pale tabby tom.

MEDICINE CAT: Smallglow- Short orange tabby she-cat.

WARRIORS:

Snakefang- Dark tom with a silver underbelly.

Tinywind- Light brown she-cat.

Morningstare- Calico she-cat with half a tail.

Quickstream- Beautiful she-cat with deep blue eyes. **Mentor to Reedpaw.**

Brighteye- Calico tom with a dark tail. **Mentor to Fernpaw.**

Hawkheart- Dark long-haired tabby she-cat. **Mentor to Buckpaw.**

APPRENTICES:

Reedpaw- Jumpy grey tom.

Fernpaw- Pale she-cat with small ears.

Buckpaw- Dark grizzled tom with bright eyes and a ruffled coat.

QUEENS:

Hollowsong- Pale she-cat with a droopy face.

Shadowleap- Dark pointed she-cat.

ELDERS:

Shortripple- Patchy she-cat, oldest cat in Mapleclan.

MISTCLAN

LEADER: Crowstar- Dark, skinny tom with a long tail.

DEPUTY: Sheepfur- Curly haired tom with a small muzzle.

MEDICINE CAT: Pineflight- Long-haired grey she-cat with amber eyes, oldest medicine cat. **Mentor to Snailfleck.**

WARRIORS:

Puddlepelt- Small calico tom with missing teeth. **Mentor to Risingpaw.**

Birdheart- Grey tom with a white chest.

Flatfoot- Brown tabby tom. **Mentor to Aspenpaw.**

Yellowtail- White she-cat with a ginger tail. **Mentor to Wormpaw.**

Bushpelt- Toned brown tabby tom.

Dovesong- White she-cat with pale eyes.

APPRENTICES:

Aspenpaw- Tawny tom with strange patterns.

Risingpaw- Grey tabby she-cat.

Wormpaw- Black tom with a spotted chest.

QUEENS:

Sapjaw- Brown pointed she-cat.

Hailfleck- Silver she-cat.

ELDERS:

Mossyclaw- Dark long-haired tabby tom.

THORNCLAN

LEADER: Pebblestar- Large tom with grey and black patches.

DEPUTY: Eelstrike- Grey tabby tom with dark paws.

MEDICINE CAT: Lizardeye- Skinny tom with strange green eyes.

WARRIORS:

Quailtooth- Small patchy tom with a bad underbite.

Shellswipe- Quick she-cat with pale ears.

Seedwind- Dark tortoiseshell with a long tail.

Quickflash- Small calico tom with pale fur.

Marley- Large brown tom.

Newt- Spotted tawny tom.

Curlclaw- Long-haired pale tom. Previous elder.

Addermouth- Tawny she-cat. Previous elder.

Prologue

Snowstar's eyes opened with a flash, the breath lifting out of his lungs. He was still in the Stone-hollow, but the apprentices around him were gone, replaced by the forms of Starclan warriors, their pelts gleaming and rippling like the night sky. All around him they stood, eyes like full moons, watching him intently with an ancient gaze. The air was lush with the sounds of the forest, a distant river, wind blowing through the trees...

A starry warrior appeared behind the largest of the stones, padding forward with a determined stride. Snowstar bowed his head towards the cat, shutting his eyes and releasing a shuttering breath.

"Twilightstar," he whispered, "oh, how it warms my heart to see you again."

The cat before him smiled, settling herself onto her paws. "Raise your head, Snowstar. I need not the formalities."

Snowstar blinked, his old and worn body seeming so distant from the beautiful star-filled cat before him. She was full of grace and peace, intimidating. Twilightstar twitched an ear.

"The apprentices you have brought here are strong. Their hearts show true." The Starclan warriors surrounding the hollow nodded and murmured in agreement.

"Their mentors have trained them well," Snowstar replied, slowly seating himself on the soft grass. He scanned the warriors around him, searching for one familiar face in particular, but could not find him. He returned his gaze back to Twilightstar.

"You have done well with Scarpaw," she mewed, "her paws follow the path of light. It is time you reveal to her who she truly is."

Snowstar's eyes flashed with panic for a moment, his tail twitching against the ground. "Surely it is too soon? Don't you think she needs more time?"

"Has she not shown you her loyalty?" Twilightstar blinked, her strong eyes giving not the slightest glint of change. "You fear her heart is not strong?"

"No." Snowstar looked to his paws. "I only worry the time is not right. With Thornclan's recent threats and Tanglestar naming Hawkheart a warrior so early, I believe a war may be coming. Scarpaw may not be ready to know the truth."

"Her heart is strong," Twlightstar's eyes burned into Snowstar's old pelt, "you must trust in Starclan. Before her naming ceremony, you shall reveal the truth. She must know her true name."

Snowstar blinked, looking back up towards the great leader before him. He let out a shaky sigh, flattening his ears to his white head. "Of course I trust in you, Twilightstar. I always have." She gazed down at him, nodding. Snowstar opened his mouth to speak once more, but was interrupted by booming thunder, spreading like an electric current through the hollow. The starry warriors around him stood, eyes wide and pelts rising, and Twilightstar jumped to her paws in front of him. The light of the warriors began to fade, and Snowstar looked to Twilightstar in panic. She looked back, unsheathing her claws.

"You must return to your camp," she hissed, the thunder growing louder and louder all around them, "grave danger awaits you. Remember what I have told you, and trust in Starclan. She must know the truth."

"Wait," Snowstar yowled hoarsely, watching as she darted off towards the stones. They cracked and rumbled beneath his paws, sinking deep into the ground. He ran after her, his fur on end, as darkness enveloped his senses like a wave, leaving only the thunder and promise of something terrible to come.

Chapter 1

Scarleg crouched slowly in the undergrowth, scanning the lake-side ahead of her. It was a cool, misty morning, and the lake water stood still like a giant cloudy mirror, the opposite shore invisible through the fog. She raised her head to sniff the air, opening her mouth to ensure she caught everything there was to smell; the faint traces of a thrush, last night's patrol. No Thornclan.

She let out a sigh, enjoying the silence of the morning, the crisp air rustling her fur. She shut her eyes, relishing in the peaceful wild for a moment more, focusing on the call of a blackbird somewhere far away...

"Stupid mouse!" Finchpaw's shrill hiss interrupted Scarlegs focus, causing her to jump, yelping a bit as the tabby apprentice came tumbling into her legs. He spat, shaking his head, a dirty leaf-colored heap on the ground. "Hey, you better watch-" He blinked up at Scarleg, flattening his ears to his head.

"Excuse me?" she growled, twitching her tail behind her. Finchpaw gulped.

"Oh, Scarleg. My bad. Thought you were a tree."

"Perhaps you'd find hunting mice much easier if you didnt scream insults at them before pouncing mindlessly," Scarleg grumbled. Patchnose came padding through the growth after him, her patchy pelt all fluffed up, huffing in annoyance.

"I've been telling him the same thing!" Patchnose shook her head, waving her tail for Finchpaw to follow her back the way they came. "Come on, you fuzz-brain. I bet you went off chasing a falling leaf, thinking it was a mouse, just like yesterday."

"It really was a mouse this time!" Finchpaw whined, walking quickly after his mentor. Scarleg sighed, following the two. They were out on the morning patrol, at Snowstar's orders; there was an

increase in patrols since the night war was declared against the two clans a few moons ago. Things had been surprisingly silent on Thornclan's end, but they were taking no chances.

Scarleg padded back to Maskclaw, Sagefur and Cricketpaw. Sagefur shook his head as Patchnose and Finchpaw came walking up, sighing.

"I expect you to hold yourself with more dignity, Finchpaw. I didnt take you and Cricketpaw along on this patrol for you to behave like squirrels!" Finchpaw grumbled while Cricketpaw gasped, looking to her father.

"Hey, he's the only squirrel here!"

Scarleg chuckled, shaking the moisture from her pelt. "Come on, we've renewed the markings and patrolled the border twice now. Let's return back to camp."

"Yes, let's. We've been out long enough." Maskclaw shook his back leg, a grumpy scowl across his face. Scarleg tried to ignore him; the sense of camaraderie that followed the attack with Pebblestar didn't last long, and he was already back to his usual bad temper.

"Patchnose and I are going to stay out a bit with Finchpaw and Cricketpaw," Sagefur mewed, "show them around the territory a bit. We'll come back later with fresh-kill, if we can."

"Fine, but I'm going back. Leopardeye is sure to be awake by now," Maskclaw grunted, already turning away back to camp. Scarleg huffed a sigh of annoyance, bowing her head towards Sagefur.

"Sounds good. The day patrol should be heading out soon after us, I'll alert them you'll be moving across the territory."

"Thank you, Scarleg." Sagefur twitched his whiskers at where Maskclaw had disappeared, grinning. "Poor Leopardeye will have no alone time in the nursery with that one constantly at her tail. Can't say I blame him, though; I was just like that when Dawnleaf was expecting."

Scarleg forced a smile, rolling her eyes as she turned to follow

Maskclaw back to camp. "Good luck on your patrol, Sagefur, Patchnose." She gave one final look back, mewing, "and you two, don't give your mentors grey pelts while they're still young!" Cricketpaw and Finchpaw called mews of farewell as Scarlegs ran off, sunlight filtering in through the leaves above.

Padding under the large mangrove root leading into camp, Scarleg noticed the camp was unusually active so early in the morning. Suntail had most of the warriors busy repairing dens from a wind-storm a few nights ago. Maskclaw had his head in the nursery, waving his tail back and forth. *He's as excited as a little kitten,* she thought, shaking her head as she padded up towards Suntail, standing near the half-tree.

"I suppose Maskclaw immediately rushed to the nursery, so I thought I'd fill you in on the morning patrol," Scarleg mewed, bowing her head to the deputy. Suntail nodded with a twitch of her whiskers. "The patrols are quiet. No signs of Thornclan anywhere; their own markers are faint."

"I'd guess they'd be too scared to show their faces anywhere near the border," Suntail scoffed. Scarleg didnt reply. The lack of Thornclan cats worried her, but it seemed to calm the rest of the clan, so she kept quiet. Suntail nodded her thanks, continuing to oversee the repairs, and Scarleg padded over to the nursery. Leopardeye must've finally gotten Maskclaw to leave, since the entrance was now open, warmth coming from outside. She crouched to peek her head in, mewing a greeting. Leopardeye lay on her side near the front, smiling.

"Oh, good, Scarleg. I was sure it was Maskclaw again."

"Nope, just me. I thought I'd see how you're holding up in here."

"Im perfectly fine," Leopardeye sneered, rolling her eyes. "I'm not some soft-belly, you know! I still think it's too early for me to be in here. I should be out there with you, on patrols."

"Maskclaw would never allow it. He's been crawling straight out of his pelt every day since Webear announced you were expecting, you know."

"I believe it," Leopardeye sighed, looking back into the nursery towards Opal and Berryface. Opal had her eyes closed, Honeykit cuddled close to her mothers belly. "At least the company in here is nice." Scarleg took a moment to look over Honeykit, who was growing everyday. Her eyes blinked open, looking curiously at Scarleg. They were the same piercing amber as her father.

Scarleg bowed her head back towards Leopardeye, shuffling out of the comfy den. "I'll leave you three. Cricketpaw or Finchpaw should be back soon with some fresh-kill for you." Leopardeye purred as her friend left, and Scarleg felt a twinge of sadness; she missed spending the days with Leopardeye, running through the forest, hunting and fighting. The demands of being a queen kept her tied to the nursery, and Maskclaw guarded her closely, not letting many cats inside. It was ridiculous, but Maskclaw was defensive, and she didnt have the energy to stand his nasty attitude. Instead she began assisting the fellow warriors in the repairs of their den, attempting to distract herself somehow.

Sparkwhisker must be out hunting, she thought to herself, sighing. She hadn't had much alone time with him lately, with him always being on the hunting patrols. Waiting for his return, she busied herself with her work, listening to the soft chatter of the clan around her. The day was warm and held a promise of good hunting; Sparkwhisker shouldn't be long.

Chapter 2

Hawkheart watched her young apprentice through the large maple leaves hanging above in the tree. Her forest-colored pelt helped her hide on the branches, eyeing Buckpaw closely. He was only named her apprentice a few sunrises ago, and he was young; but he showed strength. She watched as he lowered himself to the forest floor, eyes locked onto a nearby shrew, wiggling his behind before pouncing towards the creature. His technique was sloppy, but as was expected of a new apprentice- she smiled.

Announcing her spot in the tree with a yowl, she leapt down through the thick branches, landing on the sandy ground with a *thud*. Buckpaw seemed taken aback by his mentor's sudden and swift appearance, but tried disguising it by puffing his chest out.

"I really tried that time," he grumbled, eyes falling to the spot the shrew disappeared into. His dark grizzled coat was spotted with the sunlight filtering in through the trees above.

"Keeping your behind still helps, for starters," Hawkheart mewed. Her voice was steady and authoritative, but her eyes glinted with a hint of mischief. "It's alright. I was impressed on how you stayed silent through the hunt." Her words brought Buckpaw's gaze back towards her, and he nodded. *'Not much of a talker,'* Hawkheart thought, stretching out on the sandy floor. *'That's alright. I'm not, either.'*

"Let's keep moving through the territory," she spoke, looking up into the forest slope above. "I'd like to take you along the great-lake and towards the ravine." Buckpaw's eyes lit up at this, standing to follow his mentor.

"The ravine is massive and dangerous, isn't it?" he said, worry filling his voice. "I heard Sootstep fell in recently, and thats why he hasn't been doing his duties as deputy. I heard he broke his back legs."

Hawkheart's eyes flashed, remembering the patrol she was on with the deputy, renewing their scent markers at the ravine. Sootstep was always a cat full of laughter and good-spirit, attempting to catch a fish in the shallow stream flowing through the bottom to prove a point to Fernpaw. The deputy took a fateful step on a slippery stone close to the edge, falling dangerously into the rocky ravine, landing heavily with a *crack*. Smallglow declared both his back legs to be broken shortly after they carried him back into camp. Hawkheart was closest to the warrior when he fell; she could have grabbed him. *She should have.*

Buckpaw was watching her with interest, so she blinked out of her daze. "In green-leaf the lake sometimes flows through the ravine, creating a small river. You can catch fish there, if it floods enough." She attempted to shift the conversation away from Sootstep and the recent incident, continuing on through the forest.

"Yuck, fish? No thank you," Buckpaw groaned. Hawkheart sighed with relief at his lack of questions.

"I've only ever seen the ravine flooded once before; it makes it easier for Rainclan to cross our border," she mewed, "So we like to patrol it often." Feeling the undergrowth beginning to thin out around her, she realized they were nearing their edge of the great-lake. Hawkheart waved her tail for Buckpaw to stop, slowing her run to a swift walk. She sniffed a bit before walking through the last of the bushes in front of them, revealing the sandy shore of the lake ahead. The maple trees stood tall behind them as the lake stretched out far ahead, rippling and sparkling in the sunshine. Buckpaw gasped, eyes wide, as he stared at the vast expanse of water ahead.

"Woah," he breathed, captivated. Hawkheart watched him for a moment before looking out towards the opposite shore, flicking an ear.

"See the dark marshy woods across the lake there?" she mewed, nodding her muzzle. "That is Rainclan territory."

"Who would ever want to live in such an uncomfortable place?" Buckpaw scoffed, looking up at his mentor. She kept her eyes on the darker territory, however, half expecting to see her sister watching

her from the other side. There was nothing but the slow water lapping on the opposite shore, the ripple of a fish from somewhere under the water.

Hawkheart stood, waving her tail, to walk back into the cover of the trees. "Let's continue," she called, "we have much more territory to cover before we return to camp. Maybe you can redeem yourself for that shrew, as well."

"Hey, I almost had it!" Buckpaw mewed, running after the she-cat. She didnt look back as they backed away from the water's edge, back into the forest and cover of leaves above.

The pair padded through the dug-out tunnel leading into camp, the bramble and shrubs encasing them from all sides. Eventually the tunnel led into a wide rocky clearing, stacked high on all sides with stones and trees. Both cats held prey in their jaws, Buckpaw carrying his shrew quite proudly. After carrying them further into the busy camp and dropping their catch into the fresh-kill pile, Hawkheart nodded at her apprentice.

"Nice work today, Buckpaw. I'd like you to take some fresh-kill to Shortripple and the queens, but you may keep that shrew for yourself." Buckpaw smiled, nodding with respect, before silently following his orders and padding off towards the elders den. She let out a deep sigh as she watched him go, her yellow eyes darkening a bit. She often felt too young to have an apprentice of her own, still an incredibly young warrior herself, taking on the responsibility quite early. Her and Buckpaw weren't that different from each other, only by a few moons. Tanglestar taught her well, of course, but deep down, Hawkheart knew she was only a tool of pride. She was a statement to the other clans, especially Rainclan, that Swifttail's 'loyal daughter' thrived. She had seen many things during her training and short time as a warrior, things she wish she hadn't. Now, she only wanted to be a good mentor for Buckpaw.

She grabbed a plump mouse from the pile, padding towards the pile of rocks and stones towards the front of camp. Climbing them swiftly, she found the cave where Tanglestar resided, letting out a mew of greeting. Padding inside, she found her leader crouched near the back with their medicine cat, Smallglow. She was a pretty, young cat, small and gentle. Her wide eyes were gleaming in the dark, starry and filled with panic. They spoke in hushed voices, seeming not to notice Hawkheart, so she left the mouse at her paws, planning to take her leave when she heard Tanglestar's raspy voice call her from her spot in the cave.

"Ah, Hawkheart. Just the cat I wanted to see." The curly-haired she-cat stood, leaving Smallglow still crouched in the back, a worried look across her small face. Noticing Hawkheart at the cave entrance she blinked, following Tanglestar. The worry dissapeared quickly, and Hawkheart nodded, pretending not to notice.

"I was just bringing you this mouse. Buckpaw's training went well today," she bowed her head, "he's been improving everyday. He caught his first shrew today."

"Good," Tanglestar grunted, seeming distracted. She twitched a torn ear. "Smallglow and I were just discussing the condition of Sootstep."

Hawkheart winced, looking to her paws for a moment before locking eyes with Smallglow, who wore a disheartened frown. "He's not going to be able to continue his role as deputy, is he," Hawkheart whispered, feeling the cold eyes of her leader burning into her pelt. Smallglow slowly shook her head.

"Sootstep's legs are never going to heal properly," she mewed in a soft voice, "it would be best for him to live in the elders den."

'He's so young,' Hawkheart thought to herself, flexing her strong claws on the stone floor. The guilt swept through her heart like a gale of wind, but she said nothing. Tanglestar stood silent for a moment before taking her narrow eyes off of her previous apprentice, looking out towards the camp below.

"I want you to take his place as deputy, Hawkheart," she spoke,

not an ounce of pain or sadness in her raspy voice. Hawkheart's blood ran cold for a moment, but the shock didn't last long- she had expected this. She blinked up towards her leader, puffing out her chest. She knew Tanglestar wanted her to carry herself with strength; she was taught a warrior always did.

"It would be an honor," she forced, a bitter taste building in the back of her throat. Tanglestar grinned down at the she-cat for a moment, her misshapen teeth showing.

"You'll do this clan well." She stood, padding past Hawkheart and Smallglow to stand on the ledge overlooking the clan below, signaling the familiar sound of a meeting. "All cats strong enough to hunt their own prey, come beneath the stones for a clan meeting." Hawkheart followed her leader, feeling the eyes of Smallglow on her pelt as she made her way to the bottom of the cliff to be seated with her clan mates. They surrounded the pile of stones quickly, ears turned towards their leader with curiosity. Tanglestar wasted no time with formalities, as usual, not even waiting for the entirety of her clan to appear from their dens before speaking.

"Cats of Mapleclan, after a long period of contemplation alongside Smallglow, we have reached the decision that Sootstep is no longer able to fulfill his duties as a warrior." The clearing fell eerily silent, all cats gazing up in pain. Most of the clan knew this was coming, but the harsh truth was difficult to face.

"He will stay in the elders den with Shortripple, under close watch and care by Smallglow and the apprentices. He has done this clan well, and deserves all the care we can provide." The clan around Hawkheart murmered words of agreement, as she lowered her head, the incident fresh in her mind. Sootstep should be standing here now, his familiar smile radiating on the crowd around him. Instead, he was tucked in the shade of the elders den, stuck on his stomach and miserably fighting through the pain. Smallglow had noted that his legs were not paralyzed; he felt it all.

"A new deputy must be elected, however, and it brings me great joy to announce that Hawkheart will become the new deputy of Mapleclan in Sootstep's place." At the call of her name, Hawkheart stood, leaping onto a stone within the pile. She shut her eyes for a

moment before opening them again, addressing the clan with cold strength and determination, most cats staying silent. Buckpaw called her name from the front of the crowd, smiling, and Hawkheart blinked down at him. Others began to join him, filling the clearing with her name, but her blood ran cold as her eyes drifted past the crowd to the elders den near the camp entrance; Sootstep had crawled his way to the opening, eyes glued to her as she sat on the stone, an unreadable expression of both misery and longing, so different from his usual joyful smile. She couldn't look away until Tanglestar yowled for silence, pulling her attention back to the crowd below.

"Look at all those scars," one of the kits mewed, gazing up at her with wide sparkling eyes. "I want scars like that when I'm a warrior!"

Hawkheart's heart felt heavy and grim. Feeling the sunshine filtering through the leaves above on her back, she let out a shaky breath, attempting to not feel anything at all. She would serve her clan as deputy, for Sootstep. She would make her father proud.

Chapter 3

By the time Sparkwhisker came padding through the camp entrance alongside Toadface, the hot sun had risen to the center of the sky, beating down on those sharing tongues in the clearing. Scarleg lifted her head to welcome him, busy dosing alone near the warriors den, enjoying the soft shade cast from the thick bramble. Sparkwhisker returned her warm gesture with a wave of his blond tail, bringing his fresh-kill to plop across from her. He dropped a plump mouse at her paws, keeping a robin for himself.

"Good day for hunting," Scarleg purred, not realizing her own hunger, "I wish I could have joined you. The morning patrol was the same as usual; no sign of Thornclan."

"So I've heard. We haven't seen anything on the few evening patrols I've been on, either."

Scarleg nodded, taking a bite of her mouse. She seemed lost in thought. "It just doesn't make any sense. Why declare war, then hide away? Every cat seems relieved at their absence, but I can't help but worry thats exactly how they want us to feel."

Sparkwhisker nodded silently, looking across camp towards the half-tree. Suntail was just padding out from the path leading back towards Webear's den, busy as usual. *However*, Scarleg thought, *she seemed to have a bit more on her paws lately than usual*.

"Have you seen Snowstar at all today?" Scarleg mumbled, flicking an ear.

"No, I didn't see him this morning while you were out on patrol. I left to hunt a bit after; I assumed he would be out and about by the time your patrol returned."

"He wasn't," Scarleg turned her head to Sparkwhisker, blinking at his blue-green gaze. "I don't remember him leaving for the Stone-hollow, or even leaving camp at all. Do you think he's still in his

den?"

Sparkwhisker shrugged, finishing the last of his robin and rubbing a paw over his whiskers. "Suntail seems on top of everything that needs to be done, and she hasn't said anything, has she? Perhaps he's just come down with a cold."

Uncertainty at his optimism pricked at Scarleg's paws, and she turned her head back to look at Snowstar's den, tucked behind the half-tree. She had noticed a change in her leader ever since her naming ceremony, and Snowstar always makes it his priority to greet the patrols and oversee all camp activity. Suntail had been taking care of everything today; she couldn't remember seeing Snowstar at all.

"I'm going to check on him," Scarleg mewed, standing and shaking her pelt. She couldn't bring herself to finish the mouse, so she decided to bring it to his den. If he hadn't left, that meant he may not have eaten. "Thank you for the mouse, Sparkwhisker. Im just not hungry."

He blinked, watching as she padded off towards the end of camp, her mind swirling with all her worries. She had been like this ever since the night they battled Pebblestar and his deputy, losing Woodpaw to the raging river. Her childish demeanor seemed so far away now, preparing for an attack from Thornclan at any moment.

She stopped at the lichen-covered entrance before her, mewing to signal to Snowstar she was there, but no sound followed from inside the darkness. Her ears turned back as she slowly pushed her way inside, noticing the white form of Snowstar tucked back against the den wall. He was facing away from her, ears flat, not moving a muscle. She mewed again, watching him intently, but again he gave no response.

"Snowstar," she finally called, dropping the prey at her paws. Snowstar jumped at this, spinning around, eyes wide. There was an expression there that she couldn't recognize, piercing her heart and sending a chill down her spine. After what felt like a moon he let out a raspy gasp, slowly letting the fur on his back lie against his pelt again. He shook his head, shutting his eyes.

"Scarleg. My apologies; you've caught me at a bad time." He sat heavily back onto the sandy ground, flicking an ear. Sunlight filtered in through the lichen, revealing how elderly he looked. His white pelt seemed dull, unkept, and the way he sat made it seem as if he was struggling to keep himself up. Scarleg felt uncomfortable, feeling her own neck fur slowly rise.

"I brought you fresh-kill Sparkwhisker caught," she mumbled, narrowing her eyes slightly. "I've been worried about you. No cat has seen you all day."

Looking down at the mouse, Snowstar seemed to remember his own hunger. He blinked back up at her. "Ah, yes. I woke up with a bit of a fever, but I'll be fine. How are the patrols?" Scarleg knew he was attempting to shift the discussion, and she didn't believe him. He's been acting strange for a few sunrises now, ever since her naming ceremony. This wasn't just a fever affecting her leader, and she knew it.

"Quiet. Thornclan has been renewing their markers, but they seem weak. Theres been no sign of them in our territory."

"Thats good," Snowstar coughed, a retched sound. Scarleg winced as he bent down, settling himself closer to the mouse. His whole form shivered as the coughing fit racked his body, and as he finished, he began devouring the mouse as if he hadn't eaten in moons. Scarleg slowly sat, flattening her ears.

"Do you think you'll be fit enough to attend the gathering tomorrow, Snowstar?

"I must," he grumbled, licking his jowls. "Rainclan will appear strong and battle-ready, as we are." He shuffled his paws. "As I am."

There was a silence between the two cats for a moment. She knew Snowstar was only trying to convince her that he was alright, but behind his bluffing, there was a sense of something else; something he wasn't telling her. A guilt that swam through his gaze every time he looked at her, making him look away. Before she could speak, he stood, puffing out his chest.

"Don't worry about me, Scarleg. I only need some rest. You may go now." Scarleg opened her mouth to say more, but held her tongue. She wasn't even sure what it is she wanted to say. With doubt biting away at her stomach, Scarleg stood, bowing her head towards the leader. She turned and padded out of his den without a word, passing Webear on her way out. She blinked in surprise, twitching her tail as Scarleg mewed a greeting at the medicine cat.

"Ah, hello Webear. Are you going in to see to Snowstar's fever?"

"Yes, I am!" Webear announced, quickly padding past Scarleg without meeting her gaze. "Nice seeing you."

Scarleg nodded, letting the medicine cat pass, noticing with a prick of uncertainty that Webear did not bring with her any feverfew. She knew Webear was lying.

Chapter 4

Crouching at the edge of the slope overlooking Sky-rocks, the Rainclan patrol waited for a signal from their leader before padding down into the clearing. The full moon shone brightly above, soft grey clouds avoiding its glow as they slowly made their way across Silverpelt above. Scarleg looked around, noticing only Mistclan had arrived, recognizing the dark form of Crowstar speaking with his deputy, Sheepfur, at the foot of the stones where the leaders stood. Snowstar gave the signal, racing down the rocky slope to avoid the small pool in the center of the clearing, Scarleg following swiftly. The Rainclan elders immediately broke off to greet the other elders, warm and welcoming, and Scarleg took a deep breath; this was her first gathering as a warrior.

Cricketpaw and Finchpaw raced off from under her legs, admiring the mystical place, immediately finding a few smaller apprentices from Mistclan. Scarleg noticed that Bushpaw and Dovepaw weren't among them; *perhaps they had been named warriors, as well? Were they here tonight?* She wanted nothing less than to break the painful news to the two of them that Woodpaw had joined Starclan. He seemed to really enjoy their company at the last gathering they attended together.
Unsure of who to greet first, she noticed with a jolt Sheepfur padding towards her from his previous spot near the great stones. He flicked an ear, bowing his head towards her, and she followed suit, trying to disguise her surprise.

"Greetings, Scarleg. I heard you were named a warrior! Congratulations," he mewed, his curly pelt shining softly under the moonlight. "Were the other apprentices that traveled with you named warriors as well?"

Scarleg cringed at hearing her own name be spoken to her through the jaws of a cat from another clan. It reminded her that the darkness she has tried to run from all her life still follows her no matter what, stretching out into the forest all around her and

beyond. She blinked at Sheepfur, remembering their encounter on her journey to the Stone-hollow, when they were cornered by a Mistclan patrol that Sheepfur was leading. The deputy was more defensive then, and she felt surprised by his newfound respect towards her now.

"Thank you, Sheepfur. And yes; Sparkwhisker, Maskclaw, and Leopardeye are all warriors now as well."

"Well, Rainclan is quite lucky to have such strong warriors among their ranks," he nodded, "may Starclan guide your path." Scarleg smiled, bowing her head. The thought of Woodpaw invaded her mind again, remembering that he should have been among them that night, earning their warrior names. She tried to hide the pain building in her chest as best she could.
Stormspirit came padding up to them, nodding respectfully towards the deputy, who did the same. She let out a sigh of relief at the sight of her previous mentor, his friendly demeanor always comforting to her. She felt intimated alone in the presence of such a respected warrior like Sheepfur.

"Ah, Sheepfur! I'm pleased to hear about Hailfleck recently joining the nursery. Is she doing well?" Stormspirit waved his tail, smiling.

"Very," Sheepfur purred. "Pineflight, our medicine cat, says that she should be delivering our kits any day now." He twitched an ear, a glint shining in his pale eyes. "Is Nightbreeze here with you tonight?"

Stormspirit blinked in surprise, seeming a bit embarrassed. Scarleg let out a mrrow of laughter at her previous mentor; his affections towards Nightbreeze were apparently so obvious that they've spread beyond their own clan. *What a fur-ball,* she thought, knowing that it was only a matter of time until Nightbreeze would have to join the nursery as well, carrying Stormspirit's kits no doubt.

The scent of Mapleclan drew Scarlegs' attention away from the two warriors friendly conversation, turning her head to see the rippling pelts of the cats padding down into the clearing like tumbling leaves. They swiftly avoided the pool, immediately breaking off the join the crowd. She noticed the familiar form of Hawkheart

immediately, her pale yellow eyes glinting with the stars above. Her gaze locked with Scarleg, mumbling some words to her clan mates around her, before waving her tail for Scarleg to meet her behind a large stone near the back of the clearing. Scarleg blinked, mystified, bowing her head in respect towards the two senior warriors.

"I'm going to see if I can find Slowcloud and the elders," she mewed, standing to shake some pebbles out of her paw-pads.

Stormspirit flicked an ear, grinning, "Aren't you a bit too old for elder tales, Scarleg?"

Sheepfur twitched his whiskers, nodding towards her. "Oh, leave her be. There's no shame in listening to your elders." His words caused Scarleg to gulp down some guilt, but Sheepfur waved his short tail, nodding. "It was nice meeting you formally, Scarleg."

"You too, Sheepfur," she mumbled, padding away into the crowd. She could see Slowcloud and the other elders tucked away beneath an old tree trunk close to the hollow's edge, so she skirted along the far stones, eyeing the Mapleclan warriors around her. They didn't seem to notice her, but their scent filled her nose, comforting and familiar. She found the stone Hawkheart was crouched behind, slipping through a small patch of heather to stand in front of her sister. She stood at the sight of Scarleg, simply twitching a torn ear in her direction.

"Scarpaw," she greeted, giving nothing away in her cold yellow slits.

"Actually, it's Scar*leg* now. I was named a warrior after the night we-" She stopped, remembering the cats around them, possibly in earshot. "The night *Rainclan* fought against Pebblestar in our territory."

Hawkheart blinked, surprise glowing in her gaze; Scarleg noticed a hint of confusion there, and narrowed her eyes, waiting for her sister's response. There was none.

"What is it?"

"It's just that..." Hawkheart seemed lost in thought for a moment,

suddenly shifting her attention past Scarleg to the clearing. The bitter scent of Thornclan wafted into Scarlegs' senses, causing her pelt to prick. She turned to see Pebblestar's muscled form leading his warriors down the slope, a much larger group of cats compared to the last gathering. There were some that seemed familiar, including the shifty Eelstrike, but many cats in their patrol were not; they didn't carry the same confidence and stocky forms as the other Thornclan cats, and gaped at the clearing around them with shock and nervousness. Scarleg flattened her ears, turning back to look at Hawkheart, who bore the same expression.

"Who are those cats with Thornclan?" Hawkheart hissed, following them with her eyes. "They don't carry the same scent. They're... different, somehow."

Scarleg remembered the words of Opal, the queen they rescued from the malicious claws of Venomsight, that she was one of many rogues living with them. She bristled at the memory of Venomsight attempting to murder her and his newborn daughter, Honeykit, in cold blood.

"The queen we rescued the night of the attack, Opal, told us that she was one of many rogues living with Thornclan. She said Pebblestar promised them protection in exchange for their loyalty."

"Protection from what?" Hawkheart whispered, and Scarleg could not reply. The anxious rogues filtering into the clearing seemed out of place, their fear stench strong. They didn't seem like cats that were being well protected, and they didn't seem strong; but there were many of them, and they made the clearing feel cramped and uncomfortable. Scarleg noticed Snowstar, Crowstar and Tanglestar, standing atop their spots on the stones, watching the Thornclan cats with cold eyes and bristled pelts. Even the problematic Tanglestar held her tongue.

Hawkheart turned her head back to Scarleg, taking in a deep breath. "We can't talk here; I have to make my way back to the stones. The gathering will start soon."

Scarleg was about to ask why they couldn't just sit together now, both of them being warriors, but remembered with an icy chill that

being seen together would only cause problems for them both. Maskclaw was here tonight, and he would surly make a scene if he saw her with her sister.

"Meet up with me before you leave the gathering," Scarleg responded; there were still questions she wanted to ask. Hawkheart gave a curt nod before padding out of their hiding place to the stones, leaping to Scarlegs' surprise up onto a stone under Tanglestar. *That was the deputy's spot!* she gaped, tacken a-back. *When was she appointed deputy? What happened to Sootstep?*

Pebblestar climbed his way up between the leaders, showing no weakness or discomfort, actually seeming quite pleased at the other cat's shock. He held his head high, not meeting the other leaders eyes. After a moment of silence, Crowstar let out the familiar yowl towards the gathering of cats below, everyone falling silent. The rogues jumped, startled at the sound, and Scarlegs made her way to sit with Stormspirit, Maskclaw, and Patchnose who were all seated with a good view of Snowstar. Maskclaw was the only cat to not acknowledge Scarlegs' arrival.

"Welcome, cats of all clans. Pebblestar has requested to speak first tonight," Crowstar called, seating himself on the stones and casting a look towards the patched tom. Pebblestar flicked an ear, standing proudly, staring down into the crowd with a fire in his eyes. Scarleg saw a smaller rogue tom slink further into the ground at the sight of his leader.

"As you all may have noticed, Thornclan grows strong," he spoke, his dark voice filling the entirety of the hollow. All ears were turned towards him, and the cats of Rainclan were watching with cold hostility. "Never before have we had so many powerful, battle-ready warriors." A Mistclan she-cat from the crowd spat, lashing her tail.

"You mean *rogues*!" A Thornclan she-cat next to her flinched, anger and fear flashing in her eyes. Many of the other rogues showed the same reaction.

Pebblestar turned his head to her, flexing his claws against the cool stone. "They are warriors none-the-less, and with them, our clan out numbers all of yours." He turned now to the leaders, snorting

challengingly. The crowd below began hissing and growling, Tanglestar showing her teeth. Snowstar lashed his tail while Crowstar watched in discomfort.

"With these new claws," Pebblestar continued, "our clan requires more fresh-kill. We asked you politely, Snowstar, for hunting rights before; and you have made it clear that you wish to keep it all to yourself. Thornclan will do what we must to feed our members," he hissed, "and if that means war, then so be it." Scarlegs hissed violently up at the patched tom, and noticed Maskclaw doing the same next to her. He still bore the scars on his neck from the malicious leader's claws.

"I come again to ask you, Mapleclan and Mistclan, for your answer. Will you follow in the paw-steps of Snowstar, doomed to fall at our claws, or will you share your prey with Thornclan?" Yowls of outrage broke from all clans now, Mapleclan and Mistclan collectively calling up towards their leaders. Scarlegs saw Hawkheart swivel her head towards Tanglestar, furious, to see Tanglestar simply snarling. Crowstar took a step forward, flattening his ears.

"You may out number the other clans, Pebblestar, but that gives you no right to demand hunting rights in any territory other than your own. Snowstar is right in denying you his fresh-kill, and we will do the same."

"Fine," Pebblestar snarled, turning towards the old tom. "You will meet the same fate."

Tanglestar stayed silent, and many cats had their heads turned towards her now. She noticed, a panicked look crossing her face, as she lashed her tail out behind her. "We have our own mouths to feed," was all she said, but Scarleg saw fury light in Hawkheart's eyes. She saw weakness in her leader.

"It seems you've all made your choice," Pebblestar snorted, the amused gleam returning to his eyes. "It's unfortunate we'll have to drive you out with our numbers. If you do not agree to my terms, than we will have to take them by force."

Snowstar took a heavy step forwards, yowling, "This gathering is over. Pebblestar, you come only to threaten our clans, and no matter how many new cats you recruit, you will never take our territory." He let out a harsh yowl, Crowstar joining, while Tanglestar simply watched. Snowstar lept down from his spot on the stones, hissing for his clan to follow him as he pelted out of the clearing. Scarleg took off after him, getting tossed around in the massive crowd of cats attempting to leave, only to remember she still had words to share with Hawkheart. She stopped, frantically searching the rushing crowd, finding her back towards the hiding place they met at earlier. Taking off in the direction of the fleeing Mapleclan cats, she called her sisters name, panting as she caught up with her. Hawkheart's eyes were still blazing with fury.

"Hawkheart, I still have questions to ask you," she whispered, digging her claws into the ground. "Why did you hesitate earlier when I told you my warrior name? What is it that you know?"

Hawkheart looked around, lashing her tail, before meeting Scarlegs' green gaze. "I have to go back to my clan," she growled, shifting her paws. "Our medicine cat, Smallglow, spoke with yours tonight. Sootstep was injured, and Smallglow needs comfrey, but we don't have any. Webear offered to bring her some." Hawkheart locked eyes with Scarleg, a dark expression hiding there. "Convince her to bring you along. We can speak then." Without another word, Hawkheart spun away, following her clan up the slope and into the forest. The Rainclan patrol was already almost gone as well, and Scarleg bolted to catch up, relief and guilt flooding her stomach, making her feel sick.

Maskclaw turned his head as Scarleg came running up next to him, narrowing his eyes at her, but he said nothing. It sent an icy chill through her bones; *was he right about her? Was she as loyal to her clan as she thought?*

Chapter 5

"This madness has gone on long enough," Snowstar yowled, the clan gathered below the half-tree. The moon was still high above, full and watchful, as the cats of Rainclan yowled back with fury and anger. Scarlegs was standing off towards the nursery next to Leopardeye, who was snarling her approval. Opal was tucked away inside the den in fear, Honeykit pulled close to her mothers chest, her amber eyes wide and attempting to catch any view of the excitement going on outside. Snowstar would have the rogue queen speak on what she knew about Thornclan soon, and Scarlegs could see she was terrified; she was no prisoner, but she held valuable information, and the clan cats were fueled with rage.

"Thornclan threatens our territory, our lives; I will not stand for this any longer." Snowstar's tail lashed out behind him, seeming much stronger than when Scarlegs saw him in his den only a sunrise ago. Still, there was a flicker of fear in his icy stare that hasn't disappeared. W*as he afraid of Thornclan, or was it something else?*

"Tonight, we are bound by Starclan's ancient truce. We will take this time to organize a battle patrol, strengthen the protection on our dens and the camp, and prepare to fight at sunrise. We won't let any clan threaten our home, no matter how many cats we must face!" Scarlegs joined the cries of approval, her blood pumping loudly in her ears. She could feel every cat's excitement buzzing through the air like an electric current, claws unsheathed and fangs flashing in the moonlight. Snowstar held his tail high for silence after a moment, turning his head towards the nursery, the crowd below clearing a path.

"Opal has agreed to share her knowledge of Thornclan with us," he bowed his head, "and now we shall listen." The soft queen slowly pushed her way out of the den, ears flat against the stares of the cats around her, as she padded to stand under the half-tree, Honeykit right at her paws. The small kit hid behind her mothers

legs but gazed out, mystified by the cats around her; they all watched in silent anticipation as she took a moment to collect herself and her thoughts. Even Snowstar was watching her intently, his tail twitching behind him.

"I was a house cat before I joined Thornclan," Opal mewed, her voice shaking and quiet. "Pebblestar and his cats raided the streets where we lived. Many cats he attacked lived without owners, but there were others like me, taken from our homes by force." She stopped for a moment, looking down at Honeykit, who turned her eyes to the half-tree above. The kit's smile betrayed the seriousness of the situation she was in. "Pebblestar told us if we stayed in our homes, the other clans of the forest were already planning on coming to kill us. He said that if we joined him, he would protect us." At this, the crowd began hissing, Scarlegs turning towards Leopardeye in disbelief.

"We've never even set foot out near the two-leg place! Why would we want to attack?"

"The kitty-pets don't know that," Leopardeye growled, "Pebblestar is feeding them lies."

Scarlegs turned her head back to Opal as she began to speak again, flattening her ears. "Many of us began to realize Pebblestar had lied once we had been brought into camp, but they wouldn't let us leave. If we didn't declare our loyalty, we would be killed. Many cats who spoke out began to disappear; we'd wake up to their bodies in the clearing." She shivered, pulling Honeykit closer to her for comfort. "Pebblestar may have many cats, but they don't all follow him. They're only afraid. They'll leave his side if you give them a chance."

"Are they trained to fight?" Suntail called, many other cats mumbling in agreement. They were curious how much of a threat these rogues posed.

"We were all required to train for battle, but there was too many of us for them to train properly. If they know anything at all, it won't be enough to defeat you." She hesitated, locking eyes with Suntail. "However, Pebblestar still has his warriors; the cats that

were a part of the clan before us. They *are* deadly."

Snowstar nodded, stepping forward from his spot on the half-tree. "Thank you, Opal. You've done our clan a great service in providing this information, and Starclan will certainly light your path."

"I don't know if I believe in your Starclan, Snowstar," she spoke softly, "I only want protection for my kit." Opal raised her head, stepping forward, her eyes still shining with fear and desperation. "That is why I wish to return to my home with my humans, and to keep Honeykit here with you."

The crowd of cats went silent, looking towards each other in shock. Many began to mumble words of uncertainty, some even seeming disgusted at this proposal. Maskclaw raised his head above the crowd, calling, "We can't let this rogue kit stay here with us, can we? Pebblestar is sure to want her back at some point; it'll only cause us more trouble." Scarlegs' neck fur rose as he spoke. "Why can't you bring her with you, back to your two-legs?" Some cats around him murmured in agreement, while many others said nothing. Opal's fur bristled as well, anger shining in her slits for the first time.

"My kit would never make it on the journey back to my humans, and who's to say they'll take her? Many mothers have their kits taken from them where I come from. I won't let that happen to Honeykit," she hissed, pulling her to her body defensively. "I'd rather know she was here, helping your clan and safe, than taken from me by force." Scarlegs looked at Honeykit, feeling her heart drop to her stomach. Standing before her she saw herself, small and weak, no mother or father, living in a clan that only wanted her dead. This small kit deserved as much of a chance as any other; she had done nothing wrong. Scarlegs stood from her spot in the crowd, stepping towards Opal, looking out to make eye contact with Maskclaw.

"Honeykit was born with the clans, so she belongs with the clans. If she cannot survive with Opal in two-leg place, we must take her in. What does it matter if she wasn't born a Rainclan cat?" Scarlegs bristled, looking around at the crowd, daring any cat to

oppose her. After all, she wasn't born a Rainclan cat either. No one said a word.

"Well said, Scarlegs," Snowstar called, blinking warmly down at her. "Opal, we respect your request. If it is what you wish, Honeykit will be raised here as a Rainclan warrior and you may return to your two-legs. However, you cannot leave until this battle is through; its too dangerous to send you off through Thornclan territory now." The anger disappeared from Opal's eyes, blinking understandably up at Snowstar.

She turned softly towards Scarlegs, whispering, "Thank you," pressing her soft muzzle into Scarlegs ruffled flank. She only nodded, looking down at Honeykit, who stared back with her piercing amber gaze. It filled Scarlegs with a sense of determination.

"Then it's settled," Snowstar yowled, "we will attack at sunrise. Suntail and I will be organizing the battle patrol; Cricketpaw, Finchpaw, help the queens and elders with repairs on the nursery and the camp entrance." The crowd began breaking off, anticipation running high, and Scarlegs caught sight of Webear bounding from her spot on the stones towards Snowstar. She remembered the words of her sister, how Webear was to bring comfrey to Mapleclan tonight; if she could join Webear, she could get more answers from Hawkheart before the battle!

"Snowstar, I'd like to take the comfrey to Mapleclan tonight," Webear mewed, "the clans are still under a truce, and with the battle patrol leaving at sunrise, I still have time."

"Can't it wait, Webear? I don't feel comfortable sending you out alone tonight after the gathering. All the clans will be on edge."

"I can defend myself, thank you very much!" Webear puffed out her chest, but Snowstar looked uncertain. Scarlegs padded forward, bowing her head in respect, before addressing her leader.

"If you'd like, I could help Webear bring the comfrey. That way it would take less time." The two seemed surprised by Scarlegs' sudden appearance, and Webear blinked.

"How do you know about Mapleclan needing comfrey?"

"I overheard their cats talking at the gathering," Scarlegs spoke calmly, hiding her panic. "Sootstep needs it, however I don't know the details. They say he's badly injured."

Webear nodded, thinking for a moment before mumbling, "Yes, it's important Smallglow gets the comfrey as soon as possible. I don't know when I'll be able to bring it after tonight." She turned her head back towards Snowstar with her usual stubborn expression. "It must be tonight."

Snowstar let out a low sigh, knowing he was defeated. "Fine. You are to take the herb to Mapleclan, and return right back. You both will be needed for this fight." He locked eyes with Scarlegs, seeming as if he wanted to say more, but flicked his tail and turned off to help Suntail organize what had to be done. Frustration pricked at her paws, but she said nothing; hopefully Hawkheart could provide some answers tonight. She had a feeling her sister knew what was causing Snowstar's strange behavior.

"Well, are you coming?" Webear called, already half-way to her den. Scarlegs snapped herself out of the daze, running after the medicine cat; they didn't have much time.

The herbal scent of the comfrey stung Scarlegs nose and mouth as she padded through the forest, matching Webear's quick pace. The cicadas sang loudly all around them, and they stopped as they reached the ravine, the border between Mapleclan and Rainclan. Scarlegs felt her pelt bristle as Webear continued confidently on, not even checking to see if there was danger nearby.

"Arn't you nervous?" Scarlegs mumbled through the herbs in her

mouth, eyes darting here and there as she padded along the rocky edge to catch up with the nimble she-cat. Her own nervousness reminded her that she was still a young warrior; *Toadface or Suntail wouldn't be so afraid right now.* Webear flicked her white ear without turning back.

"Of course not! The clans are under a truce tonight. Besides, they wouldn't dare attack a medicine cat. I am assisting their clan, after all."

Scarlegs thought about this, still unable to shake the insecurity that came with trespassing on Mapleclan territory. The ravine shallowed out as they continued down the edge, eventually becoming easier to hop down the stones to the small stream within. They began climbing the opposite wall, unaffected by their now wet paws, stepping foot for the first time on Mapleclan territory. Scarlegs could smell their markers, strong and intimidating, and gulped down the heavy emotions that began to build in her chest. Her memories were weak, but they were flickering in her mind now; a long journey down this path towards Rainclan, the tall form of Snowstar, leaving her home behind...

Rustling was heard from the bushes ahead, so the two she-cats stopped, Scarlegs immediately tensing her muscles and flexing her claws. Webear stayed calm, however, as three Mapleclan warriors stepped out of the undergrowth. Scarlegs recognized them to be Hawkheart, Morningstare, a calico she-cat from the gathering, and Smallglow, their medicine cat.

"Webear," Hawkheart spoke, "have you come with the comfrey?"

"Indeed I have," Webear mewed, waving her tail in greeting towards Smallglow, who did the same. The smaller Mapleclan medicine cat radiated an atmosphere of warmth, but Scarlegs could tell she was under heavy amounts of stress; just the sight of the comfrey gave the she-cat visible relief.

"Mapleclan thanks you," Smallglow purred, walking forwards to press her muzzle into Webears flank. "Sootstep may now get some relief, thanks to you." She turned to Scarlegs as well, bowing her head, and Scarlegs did the same. She looked back to her sister who

did not meet her gaze; she was acting as if she wasn't even there.

"Come, we'll lead you to camp," Hawkheart called, turning to walk deeper into the undergrowth. Morningstare turned to follow as well, and Scarlegs began to feel doubt and fear building in her chest. *Oh, dear Starclan,* she thought, *what am I doing?*

Chapter 6

The tunnel leading into the Mapleclan camp was shrouded by thick brush and growth, the ground under-paw pressed and flattened by generations of warriors. She felt her own paws slip comfortably into an old paw print, amazed at how her memories were slowly beginning to come back to her the deeper she trekked through Mapleclan's territory. Many things from her past were shrouded in an impenetrable fog, never before feeling the need to learn more until now. Looking up, she saw Hawkheart at the lead, her strong shoulders moving with a purpose through the tunnel. She didn't look back once, and Scarlegs began to doubt her suspicions; perhaps Hawkheart had nothing to share with her after all. *Perhaps it was better that way.*

Eventually the tunnel opened to a wide clearing, surrounded by strong maple trees on all sides, rocks and stones from the ravine filtering through the camp. It was late, and many cats were tucked away to the safety of their dens, the only remaining souls in sight being Tanglestar and a smaller apprentice tom, standing near the largest of the stones near the far end of the clearing. They stood at the arrival of the patrol, Tanglestar padding forward slowly, showing no visible relief at the sight of the comfrey.

"Webear," she spoke, her voice raspy and defensive, "Mapleclan thanks you for your generosity." She cast her gaze down onto Scarlegs for a moment, cold acknowledgment shining in her eyes. Scarlegs felt her pelt rise under the judging eye of the leader; Tanglestar knew who she was.

"Of course," Webear spoke, "I have enough comfrey to share. Smallglow has helped Rainclan before; it's the least I could do for Sootstep." Tanglestar gave a curt nod, tearing her eyes away from Scarlegs.

"Smallglow will show you to the medicine cat den," she grumbled, raising her head slightly. "Understand that Mapleclan owes nothing to Rainclan because of this. It was an act of generosity

for you to bring us this herb; nothing more." Webear twitched her tail in surprise, narrowing her eyes at the leader. Scarlegs flattened her ears as well; *what was her problem? She should be thankful!*

"I'd hope any other cat would do the same." Webear grunted, seeming offended, before padding off to follow Smallglow inside the clearing. Scarlegs gave one last look towards Tanglestar, saying nothing, as she followed. The apprentice at Tanglestar's side seemed to be watching her intently as she walked away.

"Please excuse Tanglestar's words," Smallglow mumbled, "everyone's been on edge since the gathering. I'm incredibly thankful for your help."

"I know," Webear mewed in a soft tone, "Don't worry. You did the right thing in asking for help." Smallglow smiled, thankful, but her expression immediately fell again, weighed down by some sort of stress Scarlegs could never understand. She looked back towards the clearing, noticing Hawkheart speaking softly to the apprentice tom from before. He bowed his head towards her, Hawkheart giving him a quick lick between the ears, before padding off into the apprentice den. Hawkheart watched him go, her yellow slits glowing in the darkness, then turned her gaze towards Scarlegs for the first time. The clearing was empty now, occupied only by the two medicine cats and themselves. Hawkheart jerked her head towards the camp entrance, signaling for Scarlegs to follow. She looked back at Webear and Smallglow, who were distracted by their own soft conversation of medicine cat worries; dropping her mouthful of the comfrey silently next to Webear's, Scarlegs slowly made her way into camp, after her sister. Tanglestar must've returned to her den.

"We couldn't speak with eyes on us before," Hawkheart mewed, taking a seat on the sandy ground within the dark tunnel. Scarlegs blinked in understanding.

"So, you've been named deputy in place of Sootstep, then?"

"Yes," there was a flicker of doubt in Hawkheart's eyes for a moment. "He's no longer able to live the life of a warrior."

"What happened to him?"

"He broke his back legs after falling into the ravine." Hawkheart looked at her paws, speaking softer now. "There was nothing I could have done."

Scarlegs didn't like the silence that followed her sister's words, but didn't want to press further. She gave a nod of respect, letting the soft breeze ruffle her fur for a moment before continuing with what she wanted to say.

"Hawkheart, at the gathering, you hesitated when I told you I had been named a warrior. Why? Is there something you're not telling me?"

Hawkheart looked up, her expression now seeming curious. "What do you remember from your kit-hood here in Mapleclan, Scarlegs?"

The question caught her off guard. The truth was, she didn't remember much; her memories were always just out of reach, unclear and inconsistent. "I remember you, and father. Not him specifically, but his warmth; his voice comes to me now and then." Scarlegs blinked, looking off past Hawkheart, narrowing her eyes. "I can remember the night I left; the queens wouldn't let me in the nursery with you. No one wanted me there. Snowstar came, and I remember the journey through the woods..." She softened her voice, losing confidence. "I remember the night father died, and the Thornclan warrior bursting through the nursery. I remember his claws raking down my leg, leaving this scar."

"Do you remember anything before that?" Hawkheart mewed, her eyes burning into Scarlegs, making her feel uncomfortable.

"I... I cant remember much," Scarlegs whispered, flattening her ears. "Why is it important?"

"Because I think Snowstar is keeping secrets from you."

Scarlegs felt her heart stop, locking wide eyes with her sister. "What?"

Hawkheart looked around, moving closer to whisper, "I don't believe Snowstar has told you the whole truth of your past. For whatever reason, it seems he doesn't trust you."

"I don't understand," Scarlegs stood, twitching her tail. "What is it that he isn't telling me? And how do you know?"

"Look, Scarlegs, I think you should bring these questions to him, not me. All I can say is that there are things about your past, *our* past, that you should know. And for whatever reason, he isn't telling you." Scarlegs head was beginning to spin, the ground underpaw feeling unsteady.

"I don't understand; why can't you just tell me what's going on?"

Scarlegs heard the farewell mew of Webear sounding from inside the camp, signaling that her and Smallglow were finished. She had to leave.

"Scarlegs," Hawkheart spoke in a rushed tone, "I think we should form a truce. A promise not to fight eachother, in the chance that we may find eachother on the battle field."

"A truce?"

"Yes. With everything that Pebblestar revealed at the gathering, tensions are building between everyone. I don't know what's going to happen," she blinked, "but I think you and I could benefit by continuing to see each other. We shouldn't fight, even if our clans do."

A sick chill ran down Scarlegs spine. She remembered the words of Stormspirit, about how alliances were dangerous; but this was her sister, her own blood. *She could trust her, couldn't she?*

"Okay," Scarlegs whispered, flattening her ears. "It's a promise."

Hawkheart nodded, padding deeper into the tunnel, leading into the forest. "Good luck with everything, Scarlegs," she called, "we'll see eachother again soon. I would question your leader, If I were you." Hawkheart disappeared into the night as Webear padded into the tunnel, bumping into Scarlegs with an oof.

"Ah, there you are," she said, "I was just looking for you. We should return back to camp."

"Okay," Scarlegs mumbled. Her tail dragged in the leafs as they walked on, out of camp, into the dark forest above. Her head was pounding; all she wanted to do was curl up in her soft nest, listening to Sparkwhisker's gentle breaths and the sounds of the marsh. Hawkheart's words echoed through her head*; I would question your leader if I were you.* What didn't she know about her own past that Snowstar knew? Why wouldn't he tell her?

The two she-cats made their way through the unfamiliar territory, reaching the ravine. The lake water had filled the rocky slope even more than before, moving quickly; it wouldn't be long until it lapped above the harsh rocks below.

"It's been quite some time since the ravine flooded," Webear attempted nice conversation, "Snowstar will want to know about this. We may be able to catch fish easier here soon."

"Yeah," Scarlegs mumbled, looking down at the quick moving stream below. She pricked her ears, the babbling merging with the forest sounds around them, as Scarlegs thought she heard something else. She stopped, straining her ears forward, as Webear looked back.

"Are you alright, Scarlegs? We should hurry-"

"Did you hear something just now?" Scarlegs whispered, her eyes widening. She thought she heard a harsh yowl, the snarling of cats. It grew stronger the harder she listened.

"Hear what?" Webear pricked her own ears, looking off into Rainclan territory on the other side of the ravine. Scarlegs heard a vicious battle cry high above everything else, her pelt standing on end as she unsheathed her claws.

"Great Starclan," Scarlegs gasped, "**Rainclan is under attack!**"

Chapter 7

The sounds of war filled Scarlegs ears as she burst through the mangrove entrance, claws unsheathed and pelt pricked, taking in the sight of the battle ahead of her. Rainclan cats were locked in battle with countless Thornclan warriors, the stench of blood heavy in the air as teeth flashed under the moonlight. She recognized Stormspirit first, locked in a fierce fight with two smaller Thornclan cats, easily overpowering them both. Many of the Thornclan cats were rogues, small and inexperienced, but the camp was overflowing with how many there were; if they weren't careful, they could lose this fight.

Scarlegs saw Berryface, the eldest queen and Maskclaw's mother, being held down by a stronger Thornclan cat at the entrance to the nursery; this warrior was battle-scarred and blood thirsty, a cat with Thornclan blood. Exploding out of her shock, Scarlegs took off with a shrill battle cry, tumbling into the larger warrior with all her strength. They flew into the dirt off of Berryface, the enemy under her letting out a hoarse *oof,* his surprise giving Scarlegs a chance to sink her teeth deeply into his shoulder. He let out a harsh shriek, thrashing and scratching her to get away, but she held on tight as his blood dripped down her chin. She sliced down his stomach before letting go, sending him darting out of camp with his tail between his legs.

"Are you alright?", Scarlegs yowled at Berryface, who was struggling to her paws. The tortoiseshell queen nodded, eyes still glazed with fury and fear.

"Yes," she called, "but Leopardeye is in labor. We can't let any warriors get into the nursery!"

Scarlegs felt the shock run through her like icy fire. *Leopardeye, in labor? It was so soon!*

"Does Maskclaw know?"

"I can't leave to get him," Berryface growled, "and he should focus on the fight. We need Webear; Opal can only help so much, and i'm not leaving this spot!"

Scarlegs didn't want to leave her closest friend in the nursery during this battle, but she knew she had no choice. She took off back into the fray, searching wildly for Webear; when they arrived at camp, she had immediately broken off through the thick mangrove guarding towards her den. *Did she make it?*

Her eyes fell on Maskclaw, fighting against a stronger she-cat. He had her head pinned to the dirt under one paw while he scratched and bit, leaving her howling in pain. The two were wrestling back and forth, and for a moment, Scarlegs considered having him rush to the nursery; however, he would do no good worrying over Leopardeye now. What Leopardeye needed was a medicine cat, and quickly. She turned away towards Webear's den, ready to rush in, only to be thrown to the ground by a strong force on her back. She tumbled on the ground, attempting to get a grip, as strong teeth bit deeply into a fore-leg. She let out a loud hiss, using her back legs to scratch into the belly of the cat above her, spraying blood down onto herself. The move worked, kicking the cat off of her for a moment, giving her a chance to spring up and face her attacker. He was the smaller Thornclan apprentice from her first gathering, with Woodpaw; his soft calico coat was now matted and red with blood, his eyes wild with fear.

"Quickpaw," she growled, flexing her claws. "You and your clan will not win this fight!"

"I know," he yowled back, "but I *will* prove I'm worthy of being a warrior!"

Scarlegs was take aback by his words, but shook it off as he leaped toward her again, claws outstretched for her face. Swerving to the side to avoid a deadly hit, she swung her own claws along his flank, hitting a spot under his fore-leg. She wasted no time, reaching again with her jaws, gripping his throat tightly as he fell. Quickpaw yowled, feeling her teeth close tightly with the ability to kill, gasping for air. She continued biting deeply enough to leave some good scars, then let go, letting him thrash on the ground in an

attempt to regain his breath. He was small, she thought, but not much younger than herself; he surely should've completed his training by now. *Was Pebblestar so concerned with his rogues that he was neglecting his apprentice's training?*

She pushed her paw into his head again, growling dangerously as she unsheathed her claws onto his face, leaving small red marks there; nothing too deep. She didn't want to kill this cat, and deep down, she knew his heart was not in this fight.

"I don't understand what you are dealing with in your clan," she hissed, "but this is not the way to achieve your glory. Get out of here; *Now*!"

Quickpaw gazed up at her with wide eyes, and she stepped back, allowing him to escape. When he wouldn't run, she yowled again, leaving him sprinting for the camp boundaries. He glanced behind him as he ran, limping heavily, but Scarlegs would not follow him. He wasn't the true enemy here.

Turning back, she could see the black tail of Webear moving furiously from inside her den, and Scarlegs sprinted down the protected tunnel leading towards the great cave where the medicine cat resided. Patchnose was on the floor, panting heavily from some nasty wounds, and Webear spun in fury at Scarlegs arrival, ready to fight. She blinked in surprise when she recognized who was there, however.

"Scarlegs! What is it, are you injured?"

"It's Leopardeye," she panted, "she's in labor. She needs your help. Please, Webear, Berryface and Opal can't help her on their own!"

"So soon?" Webear stood in shock for a moment, only to quickly snap herself out of it, nodding briskly at Scarlegs. "I'll gather the herbs now."

"I'll escort you through the battle," Scarlegs mewed, looking out towards the still-active clearing. She could see Fawneyes and Slowcloud on top of a smaller rogue tom, fighting with the strength

of young warriors. Toadface and Nightbreeze were fighting nearby, as well.

"I don't need an escort," Webear growled, already gathering her herbs in her mouth. "I can fight if I must. Go; help your clan-mates. I'll make sure Leopardeye gets through this." Scarlegs locked eyes with her a moment, a mutual understanding passing through the two cats. Scarlegs was beyond worried for her friend, but she also had her responsibly to the clan. She had to fight.

Nodding, Scarlegs bolted out of the den, immediately flinging herself onto a rogue she-cat looking lost and afraid near the half-tree. It didn't take long to send her pelting out of camp, and Scarlegs noticed that many of the rogues were beginning to flee as well, leaving behind the Thornclan-born warriors. *Where is Pebblestar?* she thought, frantically looking around. Surly he wouldn't send his warriors to attack without him? Seeing a flash of white fur towards the camp entrance, Scarlegs realized she hadn't seen Snowstar this whole time, either. He was there, locked in a fierce battle with Pebblestar, who over-powered the elder leader immensely. Snowstar's white pelt was stained red, seeming thin and weak compared to Pebblestar's rippling strength, holding him down on the ground. Snowstar thrashed wildly, scratching Pebblestar all over, but the greater tom didn't budge. He had his paw tight onto Snowstar's throat, and Snowstar was losing strength, quickly.

"*No*!" Scarlegs yowled, darting out towards them. Pebblestar didn't even look back, pushing deeper, suffocating her leader while keeping his yellow slits locked onto Snowstar's helpless form. She was only a few paw-lengths away when she was tackled to the ground, A large and burly tom pinning her down and biting deep into her shoulder. She yowled in pain, her head spinning, as he snarled down at her with a sick smile.

"You're going to stay here, and you're going to watch." The tom's voice was deep and menacing, filling Scarlegs with undisguised fear. He was most certainly a rogue, but rippled with trained muscles, Keeping Scarlegs pinned despite all her struggling.

"Marley, no!" Opal's fear-filled yowl sounded from the nursery as she stood outside, pelt bristling, watching the large tom in fear.

He turned his head to glare at her, showing his teeth.

"You're a traitor, Opal! Rainclan is weak, and so are you!"

Scarlegs spun her head back towards Snowstar, who was fading by the minute. She thrashed and thrashed, yowling his name, but it was no use. She was stuck, and all she could do was watch as her leader was strangled under the claws of Pebblestar.

"*Snowstar*!"

Her shriek filled the clearing, which had been almost completely emptied of the Thornclan cats; everyone froze, spinning their gaze towards the camp entrance, watching as Snowstar fell limp under Pebblestar. He lifted his bloody paw, running his tongue over his jowls, staring satisfyingly down at Snowstar's body. His eyes were lidded, staring blankly off at the stars above, and Scarlegs felt her heart stop beating beneath her chest. Marley lifted his hold of her, but she stayed motionless on the ground, frozen in shock. Pebblestar raised his head towards the full moon, letting out his victory cry, as the remaining warriors around him followed. The cats of Rainclan rushed in, chasing them out with tooth and claw, furious snarls sounding from all around Scarlegs as she kept her eyes trained on Snowstar. She felt Sparkwhisker rush towards her, leaving licks around her face, yet she still could not move. Snowstar has lost a life, and she could do nothing but watch. *We should have never left for Mapleclan*, she thought, *I should have stayed in camp...*

The elders slowly padded towards Snowstar's body, licking the blood from his pelt, and Scarlegs struggled to her paws. Suntail was gathering warriors to follow Thornclan, snarling and furious. Scarlegs could feel her wounds bleeding and stinging, and leaned against Sparkwhisker for support. He purred into her neck, leaving soft licks, and she shut her eyes for a moment. She had made the decision to see her sister over her clan- *I failed them.*

"Where were you?" Maskclaw's vicious snarl sounded from behind her, and she turned, meeting his furious gaze.

Sparkwhisker stepped forward, flattening his ears. "She was with Webear, bringing herbs to Mapleclan. It's not her fault,

Maskclaw; no one knew."

"*Mapleclan*!" Maskclaw thrashed his tail, showing his teeth. "Of course you were with them, when *we* needed you!" He stepped forward, eyes burning into Scarlegs as he spoke. "I saw you speaking with your sister at the gathering. That's the real reason you went, wasn't it, *traitor*?"

"That's enough!" Stormspirit growled, padding in between the two. "Maskclaw, that is *enough*." Scarlegs couldn't bring herself to say anything. Deep down, she knew he was right; she should have been here. Meeting with Hawkheart was a mistake. She only blinked, ears flat, her face twisted with pain and misery.

Snowstar's cough sounded from behind Scarlegs, the entire clan turning their attention back towards him. He was scrabbling at the ground, eyes still glazed, as he gasped out for air. Fawneyes continued leaving comforting licks on his pelt as he looked around, taking in the scenes around him. His eyes fell on Scarlegs, blinking, and she couldn't bring herself to hold his gaze.

"They broke the truce," Snowstar whispered hoarsely, looking slowly at the cats around him. "We are the winners in the eyes of Starclan tonight."

Scarlegs remembered with a jolt Leopardeye, and looked back to see Maskclaw already speaking with Webear. He let out a yowl of dismay, rushing into the nursery, pushing Opal aside as he did so. Scarlegs blinked, padding towards Webear, concern building in her chest.

"Is Leopardeye alright? How are her kits?" She gulped, feeling her body shiver. "Did she make it? Why did her kits come so early?"

"She's fine," Webear's voice was heavy, not meeting her gaze. "I did what I could. She lost a kit."

Chapter 8

Scarlegs pushed her way into the nursery, seeing Leopardeye curled into a tight ball on the floor. She was wailing out in pain, eyes shut, as she held a small bundle of fur tightly to her chest. The kit was motionless, eyes shut, yet Leopardeye continued to leave hopeful licks all over its body. It was obvious, however, that the kit was already gone.

Two other kits lay to her side, mouths open and desperate for their mother, yet Leopardeye was too deep in her shock to attend to them. Maskclaw was at her side, his head pressed into her flank, while Opal was attempting to press the two kits into their mother. Leopardeye was refusing to let go of the motionless bundle between her paws.

"Leopardeye," Opal whispered, "you must let go of the kit. You have two right here that need you." She was sniffing over the two anxiously, shaking her head up towards Scarlegs in dismay. "Berryface and I have no milk left; we have to get her to nurse her kits."

Scarlegs flattened her ears against the sight of her closest friend, crying out with unimaginable pain. Leopardeye's eyes were glossy, unseeing, and she had never seen her friend in so much pain before. The kit's head flopped unnaturally as Leopardeye licked, but she did not cease her attempts. If she didn't care to her other two soon, they may not make it. Looking over them, Scarlegs noticed with discomfort that they were unusually small.

"Leopardeye," Scarlegs bent close to her friends muzzle, speaking softly into her cheek. "your kit is with Starclan now, but your other kits are here. If you don't help them, they may not make it."

"Hazelkit," Leopardeye mumbled, her voice faltering.

"What?"

"Her name is Hazelkit." Leopardeye stopped licking, now staring down at the small body with sorrow. Maskclaw looked towards Scarlegs, fury still ablaze in his eyes, along with fresh pain; this was his kit he lost, too.

"I'll take Hazelkit," Scarlegs whispered, slowly bending her head down towards the body. She felt Leopardeye tense, a low growl coming from deep in her throat as Scarlegs stopped, locking eyes with her friend. She seemed to see Scarlegs for the first time, blinking, and very slowly loosened her grip on the small kit, allowing Scarlegs to grab the neck-scruff and lift it out of her friends reach. She held Hazelkit softly, looking at Maskclaw. He stared back at her with searching eyes, no one speaking a word. The weak whimpers of the two other kits sounded through the cozy den, and Leopardeye flicked her ears, blinking.

"Where are my other kits?" her voice was hoarse and weak, but Scarlegs watched with relief as Opal slowly pressed the kits close to their mother with her nose, their small pink mouths latching quickly onto Leopardeye's belly. She watched them closely, eyes softening, as a slow purr released from her throat. All the cats around her let out a sigh of relief, watching as she accepted the kits, folding her tail softly over their bottoms and pressing them closer towards her. Their soft pelts resembled their father closely, but Scarlegs smiled, noticing one carried faint spots like it's mother.

"My kits," Leopardeye mumbled, and Maskclaw purred, pressing his muzzle into her pelt.

"Our kits." His voice was soft, shutting his eyes against her. "You name one, I'll name the other."

Leopardeye thought for a moment, not taking her eyes off of them, placing her tail tip softly on the tom. "Beetlekit."

Maskclaw nodded, shifting his gaze to the she-kit, her pelt most resembling his. "Bearkit."

Opal purred, encouraging Leopardeye to feed, as Honeykit popped her head up from behind her mother, watching with wide eyes.

"Mother, what's happening? Are those kits?"

"Hush," Opal whispered, flicking an ear. Honeykit blinked up at Scarlegs, carrying the form of Hazelkit, and Scarlegs looked away, realizing she should leave. The nursery was quite crowded already, and she shouldn't keep Hazelkit's body inside much longer. Leopardeye needed to care for Beetlekit and Bearkit now.

She slowly padded backwards out of the den, turning to face the camp. Many cats had gathered around the nursery already, gasping as Scarlegs held Hazelkit between her jaws. She shook her head slowly, placing the limp body at her paws, shutting her eyes.

"Leopardeye is caring for Beetlekit and Bearkit now; Hazelkit didn't make it."

Slowcloud was the first to step forward, slow and sorrowful, bending his head down towards the small body. It was already losing its warmth, the cold night wind around them rustling it's soft fur.

"We shall bury her," Slowcloud mumbled, taking the kit's body by its scruff. The other elders followed Slowcloud as he padded slowly towards the camp entrance, out into the forest. Snowstar was standing near them, watching, his icy gaze shining in the moonlight. The clan cats turned their eyes towards him as he padded to the half-tree, heaving himself upward with visible effort. All cats followed, seating themselves around him, silent.

"Thornclan may have taken one of my lives tonight, but we have not lost this fight. They attacked us during the ancient truce, and they must face Starclan for their decision. We are no weaker than we were before!" His voice echoed throughout the clearing, and many cats began to stir, nodding. Scarlegs padded over to stand with Sparkwhisker, not meeting his eyes. He touched his tail with hers, softly welcoming her.

"Now, we know the threat these rogues carry, and know they can be defeated! It's only a matter of time before Pebblestar sends his cats for the other clans. We will be ready for this, and do what we must to stop his trail of blood on this forest."

Scarlegs raised her head, remembering her battle with Quickpaw. "During the battle, the apprentice I was fighting revealed his training is being neglected. I think many Thornclan cats would turn against Pebblestar if they saw they had a chance," she called, feeling the eyes of the clan burning into her pelt. "The rogues are only fighting for him out of fear."

"Most of them," Opal called, seating herself towards the back of the crowd. "My brother, Marley, is completely devoted to Thornclan, and has a small group of cats who feel the same way. They will be a large threat to you."

"A threat we can face." Snowstar nodded curtly, looking down at the cats below. The blood on his coat had dried, his blue eyes burning now with the fire of pride. "We have Starclan on our side. Like the raging rain and storm, we will protect our clan with tooth and claw. Thornclan will not win this fight!"

Opening her eyes, Scarlegs found herself in an open clearing, large trees and rose bushes surrounding her from all sides. The sky above was painted in stars, shining brighter than she had ever seen, twinkling and moving before her eyes. A soft breeze blew around her as a star's light began to grow brighter, the dappled form of the large cat from her previous dreams appearing before her. He smelled of the forest, the wind across the water, early morning dew sprinkled on new plants...

Amazed at the sight of the cat before her, Scarlegs gulped, realizing with a jolt that she knew who this familiar cat was.

"Father?" she whispered, "is that you?"

The starry tom blinked warmly at her for a moment, a softness glowing in his gaze, before nodding his large head. "Yes," he purred, "I am Swifttail, your father. I have been walking through your

dreams for quite some time now." Scarlegs let out a shuttering breath, feeling her paws move on their own. She rushed forward, brushing her pelt into Swifttail's, running her face down his neck-fur. She felt like a kit, nestled sweetly in her fathers pelt, safe and free from harm.

"Oh, father, I'm sorry I didn't recognize you sooner. There are so many things I don't know, can't remember; I thought I had forgotten your face..."

Swifttail took a small step back, meeting eyes with Scarlegs. "The truth you seek is trapped under deep snow, my child," he spoke, "but you must never forget that all snow must melt." Scarlegs returned his gaze, searching, but could only see foggy memories, pieces missing...
The ground under their paws began to shift, thorny vines bursting from the dirt. The rose bushes surrounding the hollow began to close in, bursting with color, wrapping tightly around Scarlegs trapping her in place.

"Father," she wailed, "don't leave me!" But Swifttail only backed away slowly, his form being blocked out by the thick bushes, consuming Scarlegs vision and leaving behind only thorn-filled darkness. Her fathers words rang through her mind as she felt herself slipping away; *All snow must melt.*

Chapter 9

"Could you quit all that yowling?" Toadface growled, a grumpy grey lump in his patch of moss. The warriors den was still dark, the light of dawn not yet reaching through the branches. Scarlegs was panting heavily, gazing around with glazed eyes, realizing with a shock that she was in the den, safe. The horrors of her nightmare were gone.

Many of the warriors in the den were casting grumpy glances her way, Nightbreeze even covering her ears with her paws. She felt a soft nudge in her shoulder, looking to see Sparkwhisker pressed close to her side. His eyes were heavy with exhaustion, but he was gazing sweetly as usual, seeming worried.

"Another nightmare?" he mewed, only loud enough for her to hear.

"I'm sorry. I didn't wake you, did I?"

"I've been awake," he spoke, "you were making quite the scene in your sleep."

Scarlegs glanced around the den, seeing the other warriors already fast asleep. There were a few empty nests near the back; *probably the dawn patrol out already. After that attack, I'm sure we'll be on guard more than usual.*

"Can we talk?" Scarlegs whispered, "I don't think my dream was just a nightmare. I... I saw my father."

Sparkwhisker blinked, gazing out into the camp outside. It was still and dark, and no cat was stirring. "Sure. Why don't we go for some early hunting? The fresh-kill pile is looking a bit pitiful after yesterday."

Scarlegs nodded, standing to follow Sparkwhisker quietly out of the den, careful not to step on Patchnose's tail near the entrance. She had moved back to the warriors den, but her wounds were still visible, raw and painful. She twitched violently in her sleep; *I'm not the only cat with nightmares.*

The two padded swiftly out of the mangrove tunnel, matching each other step-for-step. They climbed through the dense territory, taking a left along the great lake towards the training hollow and the river. The cicadas sang loudly around them, and for a moment, Scarlegs let herself drown in the cool mist, the dew under her paws. She glanced at Sparkwhisker, who's strong muscles rippled with every pulse, curling her tail in relief. It was mornings like this that made her feel like an apprentice again, and with a glint of amusement, Scarlegs reminded herself that she was still only a young warrior. All the recent events made her feel like an elder.

Scarlegs slowed her pace, unsure if she was ready to yet return back to the river; while it ran softly now, the memories of Woodpaw's frail form disappearing under the hungry waves flashed clearly in her mind. She took a sharp right, signaling to Sparkwhisker with a mew to follow; she was headed into the more wooded area of their territory, near the ravine. The pair slowed their pace, stopping next to a fallen log. Scarlegs shook moisture out of her pelt as Sparkwhisker bounded to her side, taking a seat on the leaf-covered ground. The forest fell silent around them, alive with only the sound of the wind blowing through the trees.

"So, tell me whats going on," Sparkwhisker mewed, scratching behind his ear casually. Scarlegs felt more anxious, however, worry beginning to rise up her stomach once again. She took a reluctant seat, shuffling her paws into the soft dirt.

"My... My father has been visiting me in my dreams for a while now," her voice came as merely a whisper, "I've only told Leopardeye. Usually he appears quickly, muttering prophecies I don't understand. The dreams always start out calm and comforting, but end in chaos; once he disappears, everything becomes dangerous, terrifying." The words were spilling out now, and her ears felt hot under Sparkwhisker's watchful gaze. He made no comments or gave any sense of discomfort, only nodding slowly.

"What did he say this time that was so different?"

Blinking gratefully, Scarlegs took a deep breath before continuing. "He told me that the answers I seek are hidden under thick snow," she paused, "and that all slow must melt."

"Answers you seek?" Sparkwhisker tilted his head slightly. "Has something been bothering you lately?"

Scarlegs gulped, remembering that she couldn't share the truth of her questions; telling Sparkwhisker everything would reveal that she was meeting in secret with Hawkheart, even under a truce, and she couldn't risk his distrust in her- not now, after they have gotten so close.

"Theres things missing about my past," she mumbled, "things that have been haunting me. It's never bothered me before, having these holes in my memories, but the more I dwell on them the more I want to know the truth." Sparkwhisker's gaze seemed searching, expecting more, but she looked away. "I'm sorry I cant tell you more, Sparkwhisker. Theres just a lot that I must figure out on my own."

"Its alright," he mewed, "Im always here for you, but I won't pressure you to talk if you're not ready." He held his head high, shutting his eyes against the green-leaf breeze. It was warm, carrying the scents of prey. "You're a Rainclan warrior, Scarlegs. No matter your past or your blood, you will always belong here. I know your loyalty lies with us, no matter what you think or some may say."

Scarlegs felt her guilt crawl through her pelt like fleas, but she stayed silent, pressing closer into Sparkwhisker's short pelt. His scent flooded over her, distracting her for a moment, before the distant sound of splashing caused her ears to prick up. She blinked, looking at Sparkwhisker, who held the same surprised expression.

"Did you hear that? We're a far way from the river and lake right now, aren't we?" She mewed, looking around. They were close to the ravine, only a few paw steps away from the bramble leading into the open grass at the rocky Mapleclan border.

"Yes," Sparkwhisker flicked an ear, "and unless mice have sprouted wings and began to fly, theres no water around here that I can remember."

Scarlegs narrowed her eyes for a moment before remembering her treck with Webear into Mapleclan, when they had to cross through the deep ravine and climb up the other side. There was some water at the bottom then, leading in from the lake, but it barely covered her paws; *could it have flooded?*

"Come on," Scarlegs stood, rushing out towards the ravine. Sparkwhisker followed quickly behind, and before they knew it, they were standing on the rocky border. Where the deep, dangerous ravine once lay, there was now a steady stream of water, not quite reaching the top of the ravine but deep enough to hold fish. Scarlegs could even see small minnows swimming near the top, surly swept in from the flooding lake. There were rocks jumping-distance below them, providing a perfect spot for fishing.

"Great Starclan," Sparkwhisker breathed, "The ravine has flooded! All the green-leaf rains must've done this. We've been so worried about the Thornclan border that we haven't even noticed!" Scarlegs gaped in amazement, twitching her whiskers. She had never seen the ravine flooded like this, and it certainly makes an easier passage into Mapleclan territory; she grew up swimming and wading through the waterways of her territory, and now, she could meet Hawkheart with an easy way of disguising her scent.

"An easy way across," Scarlegs mumbled, almost to herself. She hadn't even realized the words came aloud until Sparkwhisker responded with, "Yes, indeed. Snowstar will love to hear about this."

"Wait, what? Why?"

He blinked at her in surprise, twitching his skinny tail. "It could certainly come in handy, if trouble arises. We wouldn't have to climb in and out of the dangerous slope in order to get into Mapleclan territory."

Scarlegs felt her heart drop into her chest; *Of course! Any other loyal Rainclan cat would think the same. What am I doing?*

"Right," she stammered, "You're right. We should go and tell him now; the fish from this stream will certainly help, with most of our fresh-kill destroyed in the attack. The prey will be hiding in their dens for quite some time after all that noise."

Sparkwhisker nodded, opening his mouth to respond, when a shrill yowl filled the air. Scarlegs spun to see a Mapleclan patrol across the ravine, rushing towards them quickly with hostile expressions. Hawkheart was leading the patrol, alongside the apprentice she saw when she brought the herbs with Webear, and two warriors she recognized from the gathering, but didn't know the names of. They stopped at the edge of the water, tails bristling, and Hawkheart showed her teeth as she came as close to the edge as she could. Scarlegs and Sparkwhisker took defensive stances on their side of the ravine, Sparkwhisker growling aggressively next to her. Scarlegs tried to put on the same face of aggression, but as usual, the sight of her sister sent warm relief through her pelt.

"You two," Hawkheart spoke, strong and cold, "What do you think you're doing on Mapleclan territory?"

Sparkwhisker blinked, flattening his ears. "*Mapleclan* territory? I think you've forgotten, this is Rainclan's side of the border. We've always owned this side of the ravine."

"Not anymore," the apprentice hissed, and Hawkheart sent him a warning glance.

"Quiet, Buckpaw." she shifted her cold gaze back onto Sparkwhisker, clearly avoiding Scarlegs eyes. "Yes, this *has* been the case in the past; but Mapleclan owns this ravine. We've only been allowing you to keep your edge because before, it was not flooded." She narrowed her amber eyes. "Now, we own this territory, and all the prey swimming here."

Scarlegs stepped forward, pulling her lip back to reveal her sharp teeth. "We never decided on this; Rainclan has only just discovered the ravine has flooded."

"Well, then you're too late," one of the warriors hissed, "we've already claimed it. And now, you're trespassing."

"Snakefang is right," Hawkheart nodded curtly, "Leave now, or we'll have to chase you off."

"How do you plan on doing that, without getting your pretty coats wet?" Sparkwhisker scoffed, flexing his claws. "besides, what do you mouse-brains even know about fishing? I bet you couldn't catch a fish even if it sprouted legs and ran straight into your paws." Scarlegs twitched her whiskers in amusement, but that only angered the Mapleclan patrol further. Without another word, Snakefang burst from his spot across the ravine, landing belly-deep onto a high stone under the water. He pushed forward with pulsing muscles, leaping and spraying droplets of water all around him as he tackled Sparkwhisker to the ground, a snarling and clawing mess. Looking across the water, Scarlegs felt her heart sink as the rest of the patrol was following him through the water.

Chapter 10

Scarlegs got quickly wrapped up in a fight with the second warrior, recognizing her as Tinywind, a small she-cat who she vaguely remembered seeing at her first gathering. Scarlegs found herself pinned to the grass, Tinywind's teeth biting down into her shoulder, causing Scarlegs to yowl and scratch at her under-belly with her sharp hind claws. Tinywind recoiled from the pain, giving Scarlegs a chance to stand and hiss harshly at the patrol ahead of her. Sparkwhisker was still fighting against Snakefang, Buckpaw joining in their tussle as well, so she turned her attention back to Tinywind, who was already rearing up for another attack. Scarlegs was ready, keeping low to the ground, pouncing backward at the last moment to then charge the small she-cat with a loud *oof*. Tinywind went flying backward, landing uncomfortably in the water. She worried for a moment that Tinywind might've landed on the sharp stones under the stream, but after a few moments, the she-cat's small brown head poked up from out of the water, swimming miserably across to the Mapleclan side of the ravine. She gave a sour expression back towards Scarlegs before limping heavily into the forest, back towards her camp.

"Sparkwhisker," Scarlegs called, "I'm coming!" She sprinted over towards her friend, still locked in battle, only to be stopped by Hawkheart pouncing in her path. Her sister's yellow eyes were glowing with rage, but just as she raised her claws to strike, she froze; something in her eyes flickered, searching Scarlegs own green gaze, before slowly lowering her claws back to the ground.

Our truce, Scarlegs thought with a shudder, *we can't fight eachother.*

Scarlegs looked past Hawkheart to see Buckpaw watching the

two, eyes wide and confused. His gaze flicked from his mentor to Scarlegs, frozen in place, watching. He was waiting for his mentor to strike the enemy.

Scarlegs pushed past Hawkheart harshly, sending her staggering to the side, and jumped right into Sparkwhisker's vicious fight to tear Snakefang away by the scruff. She slashed his side, spraying red droplets through the air, as he yowled out in pain. He stammered off of Sparkwhisker, who was panting heavily, a few nasty wounds dripping red with blood. Hawkheart's loud yowl filled the air, calling her patrol, taking a few steps back from the fight.

"This issue will be discussed at the gathering," Hawkheart growled, still looking uncomfortably at Scarlegs, "This is your warning. Stay away from Mapleclan's territory, or we'll have to send you away for good." She waved her tail, already beginning to cross the stream back into her territory, Snakefang following reluctantly behind her. He sent vicious glares Sparkwhisker's way, who returned them with a loud scoff, spitting blood into the dirt at his paws. Buckpaw crossed the stream last, locking eyes with Scarlegs for a moment. His face was twisted in a mixture of rage and confusion, but he said nothing as he slowly waded into the water, following his clanmates into the thick forest ahead. Scarlegs watched him go, a cold fear running through her veins; *Had he seen her encounter with Hawkheart?*

She will deal with it, Scarlegs thought with a sigh, *theres nothing I can do about it now.*

"Are you alright?", Scarlegs turned her attention to Sparkwhisker, who had a nasty bloody nose. He shook his head, sending blood flying through the air, standing with a twitchy tail.

"I'll be alright. It's partially my fault for provoking Snakefang like that."

"Partially?" Scarlegs twitched her whiskers in amusement, flicking his pale shoulder with her tail. He smiled back at her, cuffing her lightly over the ears with his paw.

"Yeah, yeah. Let's just say we're both equally guilty."

"We should return back to camp," Scarlegs blinked, looking up to the sky. The sun had already risen, the warm morning air blowing around them. "Snowstar has to know about this as soon as possible."

"Shall we go fishing first?" Sparkwhisker said with a joking glint in his eye, "Mapleclan sure seems keen on sharing."

"What happened to you two?" Leopardeye was the first to meet them at the camp entrance, Bearkit and Beetlekit stumbling playfully around their mothers legs. She sniffed over her two friends, flattening her ears. "Mapleclan? What kind of trouble did you two fox-brains get into this time?"

"I'll explain soon; I have to speak with Snowstar, is he in camp?" Scarlegs touched noses with her friend, relieved to see her out of the nursery with her kits. They were still quite small, but they had plenty of energy, chasing Leopardeye's tail as she spoke.

"Yes, he's sharing tongues with Suntail over by his den."

Scarlegs nodded. "Good. We'll be back," she mewed, licking Bearkit and Beetlekit both between the ears before padding quickly to her leader. Snowstar's ears pricked as they came closer, the smell of blood bringing many cats out of their dens to see what was going on. He stood, looking over the two warriors, gulping. Suntail did the same next to him.

"What has happened now?" Snowstar growled, his blue eyes flashing. "More Thornclan warriors, I presume?"

"No, Snowstar," Scarlegs spoke. Sparkwhisker stepped forward beside her to speak.

"The ravine has flooded."

Snowstar blinked, looking to Suntail, before looking back at the two in confusion. "Flooded? What do you mean?"

"Scarlegs and I went out for some early hunting, near the ravine. We heard a splash, and went to investigate; the lake must've flooded into the ravine. It's deep enough to swim cross, and to hold

fish."

Scarlegs nodded, adding, "As we were investigating, we met a Mapleclan patrol on the other side. They attacked, claiming the stream as their own territory. They told us they will discuss it at the next gathering." She decided to leave out the fact that Hawkheart had led the patrol.

"Those flea-bitten foxes!" Suntail scoffed, looking up at her leader. Snowstar seemed thoughtful for a moment before nodding curtly, looking from Scarlegs to Sparkwhisker as he spoke. "I see. How could we have let that happen right under our noses?"

"I knew the ravine was flooded!"

All four cats spun around at the new voice, looking down to see Honeykit standing behind them. Her small golden tail was held high, looking calmly at each cat. Scarlegs blinked in surprise, tilting her head. "Excuse me?"

"I saw it! There were little fish, right? And scary rocks?"

Suntail stepped forward, narrowing her eyes at the kit. "You left camp? *Alone?* Honeykit, that is against the warrior code. You could have been seriously injured."

"No, I didn't leave," Honeykit shook her head, her bright eyes glinting in the sun.

"Honeykit, we don't have time for liars in this clan. Did you leave camp or not?" Suntail twitched an ear, impatient with the small kit's disrupting. Opal came running up, face twisted in panic.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, she just slipped away from me. Honeykit, you know you shouldn't be bothering the warriors like that!"

"But I really did see the water!" Honeykit whined as her mother began pushing her back towards the nursery, but Scarlegs felt something strange rise up in her chest, taking a few steps towards them.

"Wait," she called, tilting her head slightly. "Honeykit, what else

did you see?" Opal looked up at Scarlegs, confused, but Honeykit seemed excited to share. She pushed her mothers tail away to stand tall.

"I saw a cat that looked just like you. She had a lot of scars and yellow eyes; thats how I knew it *wasn't* you, Scarlegs. She was a lot scarier."

Hawkheart, Scarlegs thought with a shudder. "She saw Hawkheart..." She turned her head to Sparkwhisker, who looked just as shocked. He walked up, narrowing his eyes at Opal.

"Opal, when did Honeykit leave your sight? Do you think she managed to sneak out of camp this morning while you were asleep?"

"No," she shook her head, "I woke up very early this morning from Beetlekit and Bearkit's crying. Honeykit was fast asleep then, and she stayed by my side until just now, when she left the nursery to bother you four." She cuffed Honeykit over the ears angrily, but Scarlegs only stared, bewildered.

"Then how could she have seen all of that?"

"Are we sure she isn't just making it up in order to cause trouble?" Suntail flicked her ears, seeming impatient, but Snowstar only stared on curiously. He surprised all the cats by walking towards Honeykit slowly, his intimidating appearance causing her to shift closer to her mothers soft pelt.

"Scarlegs, Sparkwhisker, is what Honeykit is describing true?" The two warriors nodded, Scarlegs feeling a bit embarrassed about Honeykit being the one to reveal Hawkheart's appearance at the battle. Luckily Snowstar was too lost in thought to take any notice, something strange gleaming in his eyes. Opal looked around at every cat uncomfortably, shuffling her paws in the dirt.

"Does anyone mind explaining to me what is going on? Did Honeykit do something wrong?"

"Quite the contrary," Snowstar mewed, "I believe that Honeykit

here has had some sort of vision; a prediction of the ravine flooding."

All cats turned their heads to Snowstar in surprise, who was eyeing Honeykit strangely. Scarlegs felt something stir in her chest; *did this mean that Starclan had accepted Honeykit as a true clan-cat?* The thought made her tail curl in joy. Ever since she was rescued the night of the attack, Scarlegs always had a bit of a soft-spot for the young kit.

"I still don't understand," Opal mumbled, "you're saying Honeykit predicted the future? Is that even possible? How do we know she didn't just have some sort of dream?"

"It wasn't just a dream! I was really there, at the water. I wanted to try and catch the small fish, but thats when the scary cat appeared. She was with another small cat, and they both were really surprised by the water. They were talking about someone named Tangle-something, then ran off super fast."

"That must've been Buckpaw with her," Scarlegs gaped, "and they were talking about telling Tanglestar. Honeykit, you predicted Mapleclan would discover the ravine flooded first!"

"I wish we knew this earlier," Sparkwhisker mumbled, locking eyes with Suntail, who nodded.

"I'm sorry," Honeykit shrunk back, seeming discouraged. "I didn't know it was important. I told Beetlekit and Bearkit about it and they called me silly."

"Well, they were wrong, Honeykit; this is incredible."Snowstar stood, nodding at the kit and her mother, who was gazing questioningly at the large white tom. "Opal, Honeykit, please come with me. I'd like to discuss this vision with Webear; she may be able to provide us with more answers." Snowstar looked to Sparkwhisker and Scarlegs, bowing his head in gratitude. "Thank you. You did well in defending our border today. We will discuss this with Tanglestar at the next gathering, but for now, I must see to this. Suntail, please organize the hunting patrols while I take care of this."

"Yes Snowstar," the deputy mewed, taking one last curious glance down at Honeykit before padding slowly back to the warriors den. Scarlegs bowed her head as Snowstar, Opal and Honeykit moved away towards Webear's den. Sparkwhisker twitched his crooked whiskers next to her, watching them go.

"Who knew the kit of a rouge would receive a vision from Starclan?" his tone was not cynical, only full of wonder and shock. Scarlegs nodded slowly, noticing Leopardeye and Maskclaw padding up to them. Maskclaw had Bearkit biting at his tail, but he eyed the two warriors curiously, his shaggy pelt sticking out in multiple directions. Beetlekit was following his sister, but the two parents gave no notice to their wild kits.

"So, what's going on? Care to finally explain why you both look like a couple of bloody badgers?" Leopardeye was looking at the two with a worried expression.

Scarlegs went on to explain their encounter with Mapleclan over the flooded ravine, and the fight that followed. She could see Leopardeye's face light up at the details of their scuffle, knowing that her friend deeply missed her duties as a warrior. She soaked up every detail while Maskclaw watched on through narrowed eyes. She never mentioned Hawkheart's name, but she could feel him silently judging her the longer she spoke. He said nothing, however, only shaking his head and scoffing by the end of it.

"Those rats. I bet they cant even catch any of the fish swimming there."

"Thats what I said," Sparkwhisker replied with a smirk, "It didn't end well for me, though."

"You need to go get that nose checked out. It hasn't stopped bleeding since we got to camp," Scarlegs sighed, sniffing over Sparkwhisker's messy pelt. She would offer to share tongues with him later.

"Opal and Honeykit just left Webear's den, you two should go and get something for your wounds," Leopardeye mewed. Maskclaw flicked his ears impatiently next to her, grunting.

"What about Honeykit? You still haven't told us why Snowstar is making such a fuss over her so suddenly."

Scarlegs stood, flicking Sparkwhisker's ears with her tail-tip. "Here, I'll go fetch us some herbs. I'll meet you all back towards the warriors den; Sparkwhisker can explain most of it." They all nodded as Scarlegs stood, making her way towards Webear's den. Her own wounds weren't that bad, only a few stinging scratches, but she was worried about the nasty cut on Sparkwhisker's muzzle. She pushed her way through the patches of reeds and ferns leading towards Webear's rocky den, slowing her pace quickly however at the sound of Snowstar's panicked whisper. She blinked, lowering herself into the reeds, pricking her ears. She could hear the two speaking urgently inside the cave.

"Snowstar, I really don't believe that is the case."

"Well what am I supposed to think, Webear? They've granted this kit an incredible vision but I, the clan leader, have not been able to see our warrior ancestors for moons. Why won't they show themselves to me?"

"You know the answer better than anyone." Webear's tone shifted dramatically. Scarlegs could feel the fur on her neck begin to bristle.

"No," Snowstar's voice was shaky now, "No, she's not ready. I can't tell her."

"Is it her who is not ready, Snowstar, or is it you?"

There was a long silence. Scarlegs realized her breathing had picked up, tail twitching behind her. She knew she was not meant to hear any of this, and she was currently spying on her own leader; but something wasn't right. Her sisters words echoed through her mind as she crouched, hidden in the reeds; *I would question your leader, If I were you.*

Chapter 11

Buckpaw sat at his mentor's side as she spoke, facing Tanglestar alongside the rest of the patrol near the camp entrance. He had his eyes trained on his paws, still dirty and unkept from the scuffle at the border. He had a stinging bite mark in his shoulder, but nothing serious; he could feel Hawkheart tense beside him as she spoke with Tanglestar, the rest of the clan gathering a small ring around them in the center of the clearing.

"We only encountered two Rainclan warriors at the border; I don't believe they were on patrol."

Tanglestar scoffed, flashing a yellow fang. "It's just like Rainclan to slack off on their duties. We discovered the flood first, and the territory belongs to Mapleclan; end of story."

Hawkheart nodded, but Buckpaw could feel she was uncertain. While no one was seriously injured during the fight, he had to admit that the two Rainclan cats they had fought were extremely skilled. They had been lucky not to run into a patrol this time, but would that luck last?

"Let Rainclan try and take a single paw-step on our territory," Tanglestar continued, "a clan who can't even handle sending a border patrol has no need for that much territory. Besides, the fish will be of great assistance with all these two-legs scaring away the fresh-kill."

"Yes, Tanglestar," Hawkheart mewed, bowing her head. Buckpaw followed, noticing his mentors ears flatten against her head. Was that worry he sensed in her expression? Why should she be concerned about Rainclan?

That she-cat, Buckpaw thought with a shudder, *Hawkheart seemed worried about her, too.* He remembered his mentor hesitating to attack her at the border, and watching some sort of unspoken understanding pass through the two of them. She didn't seem to

notice that he had seen, but the image still haunted him; he felt as if there was something deeper between the two cats, something he didn't quite understand.

A pale she-cat pounced towards Buckpaw, interrupting his thoughts by swiping a sheathed paw towards his muzzle. "Buckpaw, why are you sitting around like an old duck? Come and join Reedpaw and I at the den! We're practicing our fighting moves."

Buckpaw blinked towards his fellow apprentice, giving her a swift nod. "Sure, Fernpaw. I'll be right there." He watched as she nodded, padding back towards the apprentice den, and stood to follow. Before joining Reedpaw and Fernpaw's game, he cast one more glance back towards Hawkheart, who was now making her way back towards the warriors den alone. Her eyes were stuck on something far away, content and focused, but he could see that same worry swimming deep in her amber gaze. She shook her head, the dark gleam disappearing quickly as she pushed her way inside the dark shelter of her den. The concern in her eyes vanished as quickly as he had noticed it, leaving Buckpaw questioning if he really ever saw it at all.

Chapter 12

"This is nice," Leopardeye sighed, shutting her eyes against the hot green-leaf wind. "I've missed the forest." Scarlegs nodded next to her, hyper aware of the dried up marsh under her paws.

"I've wanted to take you out to stretch your legs for quite some time; I'm sorry I haven't been able to do this with you sooner."

"It's been too busy, there's nothing to apologize for." The two found themselves near the lake's edge, watching the small waves sparkle under the burning sun. "I'd like to see the ravine while it's flooded, but I don't think we'd be very welcome."

"I'll take you there once we sort the territories out," Scarlegs mewed, remembering yesterday's encounter with the Mapleclan patrol. The memory of Snowstar and Webear's conversation still burned sharply in her mind as well, but she attempted to put it away for now, trying to enjoy this time with her closest friend. They haven't walked the forest with each other for a few moons.

"Why don't we just take a quick look from the trees?" Leopardeye mewed, "we can climb up the tallest one and look out at the ravine from the top; that way we'll still be on Rainclan territory." Scarlegs looked to her friend, curling her tail in happiness.

"I've missed *this* Leopardeye."

"What do you mean, *this Leopardeye?* The one with brilliant ideas?"

"Oh, hush," Scarlegs purred, padding off towards the ravine with Leopardeye laughing behind her. They kept under the shade, Scarlegs thick pelt already feeling the effects of the hot sun above, and eventually found themselves near the fallen log Scarlegs had stopped at with Sparkwhisker the previous day. The two she-cats could hear the water running just beyond the screen of bramble

ahead of them, and Scarlegs noticed Leopardeye's gaze light up with her old child-like spirit.

"Come on," she called, "this tree'll do." She crouched at the roots of the large oak in front of them, running swiftly up the slope of the roots to reach the lowest branch. Scarlegs followed closely behind, aware that Leopardeye hasn't had much practice with climbing for quite some time, but she began leading the chase, climbing higher and higher branches until she was waiting on Scarlegs to catch up at the top. Scarlegs leaped, claws outstretched, to stand on the same branch, shaking her pelt against the sun that now beat down onto them, the cover of the leaves gone. The sight of the green forest ahead of them was stunning, and Scarlegs noticed Leopardeye's gasp at the sight of the ravine below. The water seemed a bit higher than before, visibly flowing in from the lake, sparkling brightly.

"This is incredible," Leopardeye purred, "the elders always used to talk about when the ravine flooded, but I never knew it would look so... *full!"*

"Don't pretend you really listened to their stories," Scarlegs teased, resting her head on her friends spotted pelt for a moment. "Maskclaw's going to have my pelt for stealing you away for so long."

"Oh, he'll live. Besides, those two baby badgers will keep him plenty busy. They've been all tooth-and-claw ever since they first opened their eyes."

"Maybe he should spend some time with them in the nursery, give you a break," Scarlegs said, twitching her whiskers.

"I wish! He can barely fit his big head inside the entrance!" They both laughed, shaking the branch a bit. Leopardeye turned to blink at her friend, letting her tail droop off the branch behind her. "You know, once they turn of age, I'd really like it if you took Beetlekit or Bearkit on as an apprentice."

Scarlegs pricked her ears in shock. "*Really*? Me, the mentor to one of your kits?"

"Of course!" Leopardeye turned her eyes back to the ravine, her silver fur ruffling against the wind. "They respect you already, and that's rare for them. You're my closest friend, Scarlegs; either one of them would be lucky to have you as a mentor."

Scarlegs blinked slowly, realizing with a jolt that she had yet to be given an apprentice of her own. She hadn't thought much about being a mentor, so occupied with thoughts of other things, but the more she thought about it the more excited she felt. *Plus, a mentor to one of* Leopardeye's *kits,* she thought, *what an honor!*

"What do you think Maskclaw would say?" She mumbled, flicking an ear. "I don't think he would be very fond of me mentoring them."

"I know Maskclaw can be a thorn in your pelt sometimes, but he's just hot-headed; he does have respect for you, as much as he tries to hide it." Scarlegs huffed, annoyed and confused at her friends affections in the prickly warrior, but she respected Leopardeye too much to speak against her choice. Maybe she was right, and someday she could find a middle ground with the angry tom.

"It would be an honor," Scarlegs purred, standing to stretch and leave some marks in the bark with her claws. "They certainly won't be hard to get up for training each morning; I have a feeling they'd be the ones pushing *me* along."

"Come on, why don't we try some hunting? We still have some time before the morning patrols return, and I don't think I'm ready to go back to those two biting my tail just yet." Leopardeye smirked, leaping off the branch to climb back towards the ground below.

Scarlegs adjusted the blackbird in her jaws, waving her tail in greeting as Leopardeye joined her back near the lake carrying two mice and a squirrel. She blinked in surprise, nodding towards her friend.

"I think you may hunt better now than you did as a sharpened apprentice!" Leopardeye rolled her eyes, dropping the prey at her paws. She was silent for a moment, freezing, before locking her gaze onto Scarlegs.

"Do you think you could show me where Hazelkit was buried?" Her eyes were swimming with emotion, and Scarlegs felt sharp talons grip her heart. She wondered how Leopardeye was dealing with the loss of her smallest kit, and from the growth of Beetlekit and Bearkit, she assumed she was doing well; but deep down, Scarlegs knew Leopardeye would never forget the pain of losing her first born. It was something she couldn't even begin to imagine.

"Of course," she whispered, picking up the blackbird to slowly pad towards camp. The air was dry, most of the territory dried up and crinkly under paw from the harsh sun, and the two padded carefully down the path they knew so well. As they grew closer towards the camp entrance, however, Scarlegs took a sharp left, leading them to a small ditch in the ground. Ahead of them was a barely noticeable lump of dry dirt, weeds and flowers growing around it, seeming more like any other normal part of the forest than a small kit's grave. Leopardeye padded forward slowly, dropping her prey as she walked, flattening her ears against her silver head. Scarlegs watched as her eyes softened, seating herself slowly in front of the old grave. The wind caused the flowers to sway, quiet and soft, as Leopardeye shut her eyes.

"Sometimes I think I can see her playing with her siblings," Leopardeye mumbled, "they would've been so good to her. She was so small when she was born, so very small..." Her voice trailed off sweetly, blending into the wind around her. Scarlegs thought back to the kit's birth, when she had to pull the tiny bundle from Leopardeye's grief-stricken grasp. The two she-cats were the same age, but now Leopardeye felt moons older than her, Scarlegs not having kit's of her own to take care of or even a mate. Sometimes she felt worlds away from her best friend, but taking her out into the forest like this filled her heart with an emotion she hadn't felt for quite some time.

Leopardeye stood after some time, turning to nod towards Scarlegs. "Come on, lets head back to camp. I'm sure Maskclaw is

tearing apart the place wondering where I snuck off to." Scarlegs snorted, but nodded, waving with her tail for her friend to follow her down the marshy path. Surrounded with warm green-leaf wind, Scarlegs found herself wanting to take the long route back. The two collected their prey, following the call of a blackbird into the undergrowth ahead.

Chapter 13

As the two she-cats padded their way through the camp entrance, Scarlegs noticed Cricketpaw making her way towards them from the elders den. Her pale eyes brightened at the sight of the two warriors, calling towards them with a mew. Scarlegs signaled for her to follow them towards the fresh-kill pile where the two placed their prey, licking her jowls before nodding towards the young apprentice.

"What is it, Cricketpaw? Are you alright?"

"I'm fine Scarlegs," she blinked, a hint of apprehension in her voice. "Snowstar asked me to fetch you, is all. He's in his den now, with Suntail, Opal and Toadface." Scarlegs blinked, exchanging a confused glance with Leopardeye before nodding, flicking an ear awkwardly.

"Er, okay; thank you, Cricketpaw. I'll head there now." Cricketpaw bowed her head before hurrying towards the apprentice den. Leopardeye flicked her tail, looking towards Snowstar's den near the half-tree.

"What do you think that's about?"

"I'm not sure," Scarlegs shook her pelt, taking a glance around camp. She could see Stormspirit and Nightbreeze sharing tongues near the den entrance, as well as Sparkwhisker fast asleep inside; *"He must've been out on the dawn patrol,"* she thought to herself, wanting nothing more than to curl up and join him in snoozing the warm morning away. However, Snowstar needed her, and it seemed urgent.

"I'll be back," Scarlegs mewed, licking her friend between the ears before bounding off towards Snowstar's den behind the half-tree. She could smell the group of cats within, blinking as she pushed through the thick wall of lichen, bowing her head in greeting at the cats who were seated there. Snowstar sat in the

center of the den, surrounded by Toadface and Opal, with Suntail seated at his side. Opal looked nervous as usual, and Scarlegs noticed that Honeykit was not with her as she usually was.

"Greetings, Scarlegs. Thank you for coming." Snowstar flicked an ear as he spoke, and the other cats gave their own mews of greeting as well.

"I would've liked to have you on the dawn patrol this morning, Scarlegs," Suntail spoke calmly, and Scarlegs bowed her head once more towards the she-cat.

"My apologies; I took Leopardeye out to stretch her legs, and we ended up hunting quite a bit."

"That's alright. We have much more important matters to discuss," Snowstar interrupted, waving his large tail. "It's time we assemble a patrol to investigate Thornclan's camp."

"Thornclan's *camp*, Snowstar?" Scarlegs blinked, "you mean you want to go there? How are we supposed to do that, especially after their attack?"

Toadface grunted in agreement, flicking a shredded ear. "They're bound to be on edge, as well as on guard."

"Perhaps," Snowstar mewed, "Opal, will you repeat what you told me earlier?"

Opal nodded, turning her soft face towards the warriors in front of her. "Pebblestar has the camp spread out to make room for all the rogues; he's moved most of the cats deeper into the plains. The only cats who remain in Thornclan's original camp are the elders and the weak, to separate them from the stronger cats."

"He's bound to have guards there regardless, however the chances of us getting close are much higher," Suntail murmured. "A patrol could certainly defeat a few guards."

"Preferably, we won't have to," Snowstar grunted, "I want to avoid direct conflict as much as possible. Our true goal here is to get close enough to the cats who want to break away from

Pebblestar to try and convince them to fight back. Opal believes there's enough of them to change the tide of this war."

"She *believes*?" Toadface grunted, locking his yellow slits with the queen, "or she knows?"

Scarlegs noticed Opal shrink back slightly from the rough warrior's tone, feeling pity for her, but also knowing he held truth in his concern; Pebblestar knows they have Opal in their care, and could very well have changed his set up in preparation for something like this.

"Toadface is right. Pebblestar is smart, he could be expecting us to send a patrol in to spy," Scarlegs spoke, trying to keep a neutral tone. "There could be a trap just waiting for us." She felt Snowstar's icy gaze fall from Toadface to her.

"You're right to be concerned," he mewed, "this is a dangerous mission. However, I didn't choose you for nothing; I am not ordering you to come, but I know you have what it takes." Scarlegs blinked, looking to Toadface, who let out a low sigh.

"Of course I'm coming." he snorted in annoyance, but Scarlegs knew he would never decline Snowstar's wishes. He was an honorable warrior, and soon, Scarlegs felt the eyes of all cats fall on her.

"Me too," she mewed, "Pebblestar needs to pay for everything he's caused, and if this gets us closer to that day, then I'm all in." Snowstar nodded, a strange expression filling his eyes as he watched the young warrior. Scarlegs wished what she saw in him was pride, but a sinking feeling in her gut told her there was something else there. She only wished she knew what it was.

"It's settled, then," Snowstar spoke, shifting his gaze back to Suntail and Opal. "We will leave tonight, at moonrise. Suntail will stay behind to keep the clan in order. Toadface, Scarlegs, Opal, you three will accompany me into Thornclan territory to try and convince the cats on the outskirts of their camp to turn against Pebblestar. With Starclan's blessing, we will make it back without conflict."

"Wait, Opal is joining us? Are you sure that's safe?" Toadface looked questioningly at the queen, who's eyes glittered in the shadow of the cave.

"We'll need her to guide us through their territory," Snowstar mewed, as Opal stood from her spot in the dusty ground.

"I know the places they will be," she mumbled, "and how to reach them without being seen. Besides... I've decided to leave for my humans once we reach their territory."

Scarlegs blinked, twitching an ear in surprise. "Don't you think that's dangerous? What if a patrol catches you? Pebblestar wouldn't let you get very far. And what about Honeykit? Do you think she's ready to be without you?"

Opal's gaze softened as she turned her eyes to her paws. "I know how to make it out of the fields unseen. There's a trail along Pebblestar's territory where humans like to walk their dogs; I doubt he'd have any cats near there. If I follow the path long enough, I'll make it home." She lifted her head to look out the cave entrance, towards the nursery, where Honeykit was tussling with the other kits outside in the sun. "Besides, your Starclan seems to have shown they've accepted her. She belongs here, with you." A soft sadness filled her voice as she spoke, and Scarlegs bowed her head in understanding. She saw the intensity of a mother's love everyday in Leopardeye, and knew how difficult Opal's decision to leave her only kit behind to a strange life must be.

"Go prepare yourselves," Snowstar mewed, signaling to the two warriors with his tail, "we leave at moonrise. Tell few cats; we don't need more panic throughout the camp right now."

The night wind blew softly through the warriors den, tickling Scarlegs nose as she lay grooming Sparkwhisker's pelt. He lay fast asleep, chest rising and falling softly next to her, exhausted from spending the day on border patrol. She studied his blond fur,

wanting only to bury her muzzle in his sweet scent. So many feelings swam through her green gaze, yet she couldn't bring herself to voice them. Fighting and hunting have always come easy to her, but emotions were an entirely new territory, unexplored and daunting. Sparkwhisker opened his jaws into a large yawn, stretching his legs next to her, letting himself lie flat again onto his back. Scarlegs let out a soft mrrow of laughter, shaking her head; whatever she felt for the blond tom, it had to wait. Looking up through the canopy of leaves above, she noticed the moon climbing its way through the starry sky. Toadface stood from his nest near the back of the den, his shining eyes locking into Scarlegs with a curt nod. It was time.

She stood carefully, making sure to step around Sparkwhisker and the other warriors around her on her way towards the den entrance. Once outside she gave her pelt a good shake, listening to the loud cicadas around them. Toadface did the same, sniffling in the warm air.

"Seems like a good night for a spy mission," he grumbled, making his way towards the camp entrance. Scarlegs followed, casting a look back at Snowstar's den. He was beginning to emerge as well, followed by Opal, who had Honeykit right at her paws. For a moment Scarlegs wondered if she had changed her mind, and a cold shock ran through her veins; *Honeykit could never make the treck all the way to the twoleg-place*. However, she watched as Opal leaned her head to touch noses with her kit, eyes shut painfully tight. Honeykit was blinking up at her mother in confusion, her small tail held high. The two stood like that for quite some time before Opal whispered words she could not hear into the kits fur, leaving a soft lick between her ears, and padding slowly backward. She walked towards the patrol at the camp entrance without looking back, leaving Honeykit seated alone in front of the nursery. Her wide eyes glittered brightly under the stars, and for a moment Scarlegs saw herself, alone and confused in an unfamiliar place, missing the comfort of her family. The vision sent painful emotion through her heart, and she could only look away once Toadface nudged her softly towards the mangrove tunnel. Shutting her eyes and taking a deep breath, Scarlegs followed the others into the forest, leaving Honeykit waiting alone under the moon for her

mother, who was not coming back.

:ANNOUNCEMENT:

Good Afternoon Dear Readers!

It has been quite some time since any uploads have been made on this series, and I first and foremost want to apologize for my unannounced, and *very, very long* hiatus. Life has been very difficult for me, as it has for all of us, and although I wish I could have used this pandemic as an opportunity to steamboat through finishing this series and giving you all the content you deserve, I was unable to do so. I not only took a step back from uploading here on Wattpad, but if you happen to follow me on any of my other platforms, you may have noticed that I took a hard pause there as well. I took a much needed step away from any kind of public uploading, to allow space for myself to breath during all of the madness that has dropped into my life, and in doing so, I have been able to find peace.
However, something that I truthfully did not expect, was the overwhelming amount of support that you readers provided to me and my story that started as something so small and fun, and has now grown into a massive following that I am just completely blown away by! You readers have flooded my inbox with messages of encouragement, lovely praises, and it just warms my heart so much to know that you all love this story and truly want to see it continue!

I wanted to make this announcement to assure you that the story will eventually continue! I am unable to provide an exact upload date right this moment, it's something I'd like to find time for again at some point but I'm much more active on my other socials - I'm working on lots of new projects these days and exploring my art more, which is something I get a lot of questions about on here!

Again, thank you all, from the bottom of my heart, for making this little fan-made story of mine that my middle school self decided to turn into something I still enjoy working on today! Stay tuned for more updates, stay safe, and a happy new year!

Yours truly,
~ Snailfleck